Stop whining about **Left 4 Dead 2!** STFU and turn to p.32!

PC GAMER®

EXPOSED!

Brink
Monkey Island
Homefront
Modern Warfare 2

REVIEWED!

Prototype
Fallout 3: Point Lookout
Overlord 2
Call of Juarez 2



GALACTIC EXCLUSIVE!

SUPREME COMMANDER 2

HANDS-ON!

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

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PC GAMER

SEPTEMBER 2009

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PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

THIS IS THE GOOD SHOT



I recently made a pact with myself to punish any product that assaults me with bad marketing. Now, I'm no consumer advocate, so I harbored no grandiose notions of bringing down The Man with my meager protestations. Instead, I had a more straightforward goal: If I see a commercial that annoys me, I will avoid supporting that product. It was my simple, personal way of filtering the signals from the noise in an oversaturated media marketplace. Too bad my little experiment was completely unsustainable. I quickly learned that my goofy protest was at once impractical ("I'm already stuck with Comcast"), pointless ("I don't even shop at Old Navy") and even masochistic ("But I like the occasional Whopper!").

I tell you this not to dissuade you from pursuing your own commercial cleanse, but because I was reminded of my failed experiment during a post-E3 podcast when producer Andy Bauman asked Evan and I about the bizarre direction *Dragon Age: Origins* seemed to be headed in. Like a lot of our readers, Andy was understandably concerned that *Origins* was taking a turn for the stupid. Two gore-tastic videos to the tune of Marilyn Manson's "This Is the New Sh–t," followed by an E3 demo that focused largely on the philandering of your character—well, it's easy to understand the apprehension.

As we said on the podcast, don't worry: *Origins* is still every bit as hardcore, authentic, deep and serious as it's ever been. The only thing that changed? Someone at EA got scared, precisely *because* that game is so hardcore, authentic, deep and serious. Toss in the fact that *Origins* is a very PC-style game being pushed onto consoles and you can see why they wanted to dumb down the marketing. The only problem? In that quest for the lowest common denominator, you might alienate both your core consumer as well as the unwashed masses who—believe it or not—sometimes can see right through you.

Someone got scared, precisely *because* that game is so hardcore

That's where *PC Gamer* comes in. We've always had the best reviews—but these days you can also turn to us to help guide you through the hype and hyperbole even pre-release. We'll let you know when a game like *Origins* is a victim of bad marketing. We'll tell you when you should care about a new franchise with tons of potential, like *Homefront* (p.29). We'll weigh the potential against the pitfalls in a promising game like *Brink* (p.10). We'll reveal when we're torn about game, like we are over *Singularity* (p.28). We're even willing to temper our excitement in our cover stories, raising the right questions and sharing our concerns over a hotly anticipated game like *Supreme Commander 2* (p.44).

So let the marketers do what they will. You've got us on your side, sorting through all the haze and confusion each and every month.

GARY

GARY STEINMAN, EDITOR IN CHIEF

THE PLAYLIST 0909

GARY STEINMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF



Gary embarked on a tour of profoundly adequate shooters, beginning with *F.E.A.R. 2*, followed by *CoD: World at War*. Both were fun, but they pale in comparison to his hour of bliss in *Blueberry Garden*.

LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR



Logan is almost through his second internal organ-soaked tour of *Prototype*, finally starting to enjoy *GTA IV*, and really needs to stop obsessing over character creation in *The Sims 3* and start playing.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR



Dan wasn't allowed to play any games on his honeymoon vactation (women—am I right?) but he made it back home just in time to continue his *Fallout 3* adventure in *Point Lookout*.

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR



Evan won't shut up about *ArmA II*. It's wonderfully bipolar, he says—one moment, it's nose-in-the-grass superrealistic war; the next, you're recreating D-Day in the mission editor using bunnies and 300 Apaches.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER



Drinking games, emotional games, political games—Dan's been a busy boy this month, and that's just at work! Once home, though, our grumpy artiste unwinds with browser-based flash freebies.

JOSH AUGUSTINE EPIC INTERN



Trapped in offline games by internet troubles, Josh found solace hurling watermelons at zombies, slaying satyrs in *Titan Quest* (almost an MMO), and quickly getting bored of *Assassin's Creed*.

MAX MCGEE TUBA CAPTAIN



All of his persistent e-mailing finally paid off; now PCG's newest intern spends his days getting lost in the city, running copies, making coffee and playing *Plants vs. Zombies*. Just as planned.

Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

PC Gamer (ISSN 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus a Holiday issue following the December issue, by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Periodicals Postage Paid at South San Francisco, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Subscriptions: One year basic rate (12 issues & 12 CDs: U.S.:$29.95. Canada: $49.95. Foreign: $69.95. Canadian price includes postage and GST (GST #128220688). For customer service, write PC Gamer Customer Service, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Phone: (800) 898-7159. Online: www.pcgamer.com/customerservice. Postmasters please send change of address to PC Gamer, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Corporate, advertising sales, circulation, editorial and production offices: Future US, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Editorial information should be addressed to: Editor, PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Overnight delivery parcels should be addressed to: PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Future US publishes Guitar World, Mac|Life, Maximum PC, Nintendo Power, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, Pregnancy, Revolver, Windows Vista: The Official Magazine and The Official Xbox Magazine. Entire contents copyright 2009 Future US. All rights reserved. Reproduction is whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Reproduction on the Internet of the articles and pictures in this magazine is illegal without the prior written consent of PC Gamer. Products named in the pages of PC gamer are trademarks of their respective companies. Future US is not affiliate with the companies or products covered in PC Gamer. IPM# 0781118. Produced in the U.S.A. Ride-along Enclosure in the following edition(s): C1, D1, D2, D3, D4. Standard enclosure: None. Publications Mail Agreement #40043631. Returns: 4960-2 Walker Road, Windsor ON N9A 6J3.

LETTERS

"Chris Avellone's and Tim Schafer's games are as equally marked by their creators as David Lynch's and Ingmar Bergman's films."

LETTERS

Somebody in the office told a joke the other day, and everybody laughed. But afterwards, there was this really uncomfortable silence. What happened is that we all realized at the same time that we were kind of tired of listening to each other. So, please write us at letters@pcgamer.com.



WIN!

CIVILIZATION IV COMPLETE!

How complete? *Civ IV, Civ IV: Warlords, Civ IV: Beyond the Sword* and *Civ IV: Colonization*. That complete. Just email contests@pcgamer.com with "wecomeinpeace" in the subject line, and include your full name and mailing address in the message body. Contest ends Sept. 4, 2009. See full contest rules on page 95. It's cheaper than a lottery ticket, and your spouse won't have you killed for the loot!

ARE THEY, OR AREN'T THEY?

Logan Decker is right when he says that games don't have authors in the sense that paintings do (July 2009). But games, like movies, are a community project. Just because a director, several producers, editors, a cinematographer, a composer, and a host of other people were involved in the creation of a game doesn't diminish the artistic merit. Chris Avellone's and Tim Schafer's games are as equally marked by their creators as David Lynch's and Ingmar Bergman's films. To argue that "there is no content without a player," rings hollow. An unsuccessful movie is still art even if no one watched it. The size of an audience is not a determining factor.

Play is indeed important, as Mr. Decker suggests. Enjoying art can certainly be play. To force a division between the two is unnecessary. I suggest that Mr. Decker take a stroll through a modern art museum and see if he is unable to play. NICHOLAS RACZ

Logan Decker responds: I didn't mean to suggest that art requires a single author. Certainly art can emerge from a collaborative effort and even contain other works of art within itself (script, performance, score, etc.). But once a movie is finished, it doesn't require an audience of any size to be complete. Once a game is finished, on the other hand, it's still just little bits of textures and audio and code waiting for the gamer to make something of it. That's not a fault or a deficit—that's why we love games.



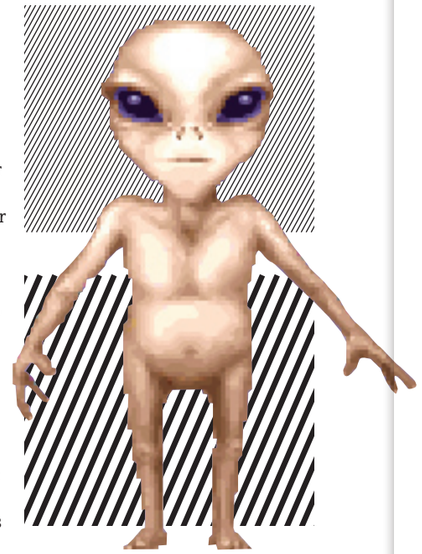
ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/DOODLEMACHINE

Last semester I took an easy credit class called Art Appreciation 2, and was required to write a four-page essay on a painting called *The Swing*. Now I saw this picture and thought, well this is a lady on a swing. But apparently her flying shoe meant she was a slut, a dolphin fountain was the symbol for a vagina, a man in the bushes was one of her lovers, the man behind her was her husband, and a whole lot of crap that made absolutely no sense at all.

We are lucky games are not like this. MATT SHORT

X-COMMIES

I have listened to Dan go on about *X-COM* on the podcast and I agree with him whole-heartedly. After seeing the spread in the mag, I was wondering if Dan has ever done a strategy guide for the game. My brother got me hooked when it came out and I am finally playing



PC GAMER AFTER HOURS

MESSAGE BOARDS

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Evan's Twitter Feed
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ELahti



Josh's Twitter Feed
http://twitter.com/
JAugustine

MULTIPLAYER

PC Gamer
Steam Group
http://steamcommunity.com/groups/pcg

PC Gamer/Maximum PC
Team Fortress 2
Server IP
66.151.138.34:27015

CHATLOG

I just noticed that OnLive spelled backwards is EvilNo. Also, the buttons on the controller, read in a counter-clockwise manner, spell VILE as well as EVIL. Hm... makes you wonder if there's more to this than meets the eye.
Debi Dalio

I hate game pirates. I hope they all get horrible dysentery and break their arms!
David Beyerle

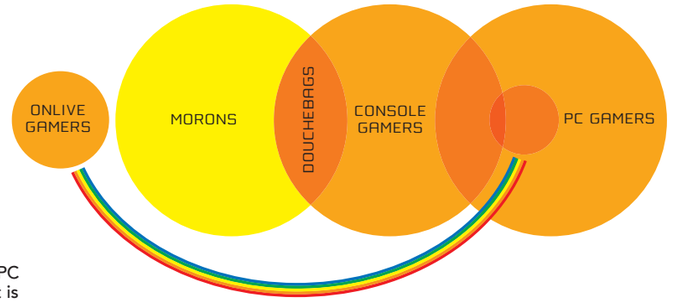
I've been having a blast buying cheap games on Steam. I had never played the Civilization series before—what great games! I also was able to pick up Defense Grid for cheap, which has made me love tower defense.
Marty King

TO BOLDLY GO WHERE NO APOLOGY HAS GONE BEFORE

A clearly upset Chad Maxton objected to our description of the four-year run of *Star Trek: Enterprise* as "regrettable." In the interests of space (page space, not outer space), instead of printing his 438-word admonishment, we will print this image of the *PC Gamer* Parking Lot Penguin instead.



THE RAINBOW CONNECTION



When I first saw the news about the OnLive services (July 2009), I was skeptical about it too. But the real reason I'm skeptical is that as gaming changes, it becomes something else. I mean, I *love* upgrading my hardware, I *love* buying my games, I *love* my PC gaming culture the way it is right now!

In the May issue, we saw a graph that clearly illustrated that most console gamers were douchebags. So my question is, are we going to get douchebags into the PC gaming world if OnLive becomes a success? EDGAR ALASTRE

Note that the Venn diagram data from May 2009 indicates that only some console gamers are—well, let's not overuse the word. But the really good news is that new data suggests that were OnLive to become a success, its players would travel through a magical rainbow tunnel and be temporarily elevated to the awesomeness of the PC gamer for as long as he or she kept playing PC games.

regularly again thanks to Steam. I love the game and I keep coming back to it despite the fact that I continually get my ass kicked! I would love some help getting through the original game.
DAN CONNAUGHTON

Dan Stapleton instructs: I've never done a strategy guide for X-COM *(even though I love the game, the guys who write strategy guides are* way *more hardcore than I could ever hope to be), but there are a bunch of great ones out there if you Google around for them. But here are a few Stapleton-approved tips to get you started. Go for laser rifles as soon as possible, and use those until you can get blaster bombs and heavy plasma. Also, when you start going up against psychics, make sure to build a psychic screening center at one of your bases and run a bunch of raw recruits through training to weed out the simple-minded guys that will be instantly mind-controlled and turn on you.*

PRTSCN



TOM BLAND FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/TOMBLAND

Joey D of Atlanta, Georgia alerted us to this horrifying image from the Flickr pages of Tom Bland (Bland's own website is www.maneggs.com), which bears a haunting resemblance to our own Coconut Monkey. Mr. Bland reports: "I'll eat pretty much anything, but I couldn't bring myself to eat this."



Send your favorite images and screenshots to the PC Gamer *Historical Archives. If we print them, the page combined with your passport may make you eligible for free admission to the exciting European Union!*

WORLD OF WEIRD

I was just reading the article on *Zeno Clash* (June 2009), and it was one of the oddest-looking games I've ever seen (c'mon, parrot men?). *PC Gamer* should make a list of the strangest PC games. I would love to see what odd things I've been missing on my PC. TYLER RIDEOUT

Here are a few of the strangest PC games we played that didn't emotionally scar us to the point that we blocked them out of our memories. If readers have any other bizarre PC games to add to the list, send them to letters@pcgamer.com!

BAD MOJO You play as a renter-turned-cockroach in a seedy San Francisco apartment building. Re-released as *Bad Mojo Redux* in 2004. $19.99, snipurl.com/j1bay

PORRASTURVAT You throw a guy down the stairs, and collect points for the injuries he suffers on the way down. Free, snipurl.com/j1b9r

THE GRAVEYARD You walk an old lady through a graveyard to a bench, where she sits. In the paid version of the game, she dies. Free, snipurl.com/j1b7c

ROSE AND CAMELLIA The gameplay consists of two elegantly dressed Victorian ladies



slapping each other and dodging each other's attacks. Free, snipurl.com/j1b60

PATHOLOGIC You are given twelve days to survive a devastating infection. You probably won't, and neither will anybody else. Hellishly existential. snipurl.com/j1c5o

BRINK

BETHESDA AND SPLASH DAMAGE TAKE A SHOT AT GREATNESS... WE CALL THE ODDS OF SUCCESS

Play it alone. Play it cooperatively with your best buds. Play it with prejudice against your mortal enemies. However you approach *Brink*—a new shooter from *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* developer Splash Damage—you're promised a seamless experience with your persistent character across all modes. That's just one of the many bold claims we heard in an eyes-only showing hosted by Splash's creative director Paul Wedgwood. The developer also boasted about *Brink*'s incredible visuals and innovative control scheme. So what should you really expect when you step onto the man-made floating city of Ark? Aside from some serious gunplay between the "security" and the "resistance" in a near-future setting—whose result will decide the fate of mankind—we're not yet sure. But that's not gonna stop us from handicapping the claims of awesomeness purported by Wedgwood about his intriguing new game.

GARY STEINMAN



LOOK

WHAT THEY SAY
"We're pretty well known for advancing visuals in videogames."

WHAT THEY MEAN
Enemy Territory looked great! Our new game will look great too!

WHAT WE SAY Though Wedgwood was humbly referring to his team's technical prowess, we were more impressed with the game's unique visual style. Lanky characters that split the difference between realistic and cartoony, set in a ruined environment that eschews "next-gen brown" for bright colors, adds up to a refreshing change of pace from the dreary sameness that plagues too many shooters. As long as they don't screw up along the way, we're already sold on the game's quirky visual style.

ODDS OF AWESOMENESS
1.5:1

VITALS
DEVELOPER Splash Damage
PUBLISHER Bethesda
RELEASE Spring 2010
LINK brinkthegame.com



MOVE

WHAT THEY SAY
"Let's talk about what we're doing to advance kinesthetics, or the way the game actually feels to play. It starts with something we've developed called S.M.A.R.T. The idea behind the system is that it applies the traditional controls you're used to in a shooter without the frustrating artificial constraints."

WHAT THEY MEAN Let's get this out of the way first: it stands for "Smooth Movement Around Random Terrain." No grimaces; you gotta admit it's a clever acronym. As for what it really stands for: You basically look in whatever direction you're heading, hold down a button, and the game does the rest. Blocked by a security gate? Hold the assigned key, then gaze upward to vault over it or downward to slide under the laser beams.

WHAT WE SAY We're fans of almost anything that makes a game more accessible, and we also stand behind the removal of awkward platforming elements in our shooters. But we're mixed on whether this'll nerf the experience for core gamers. Wedgwood claims the system is equally helpful for advanced players, who can use it for tactical advantage, uncovering alternate pathways, then tapping the S.M.A.R.T. button again to slide behind cover. That said, we can't figure out why noobs won't be able to do the same exact thing…

ODDS OF AWESOMENESS
3:1

RANK UP

WHAT THEY SAY "You advance the same persistent character irrespective of whether you're playing offline or online."



WHAT THEY MEAN Play each level solo, co-op or versus, taking your uniquely customized avatar along for the ride. (Spend your experience points to further your customization.) The levels are the same, regardless of how you play—though the action will change depending on the specific choices made by your squadmates and enemies (AI or not).

WHAT WE SAY
Honestly, we're still a bit unclear on how this'll work. We get that the same level can function in all three modes…but since this is a mission-based, story-driven game, what happens if you want to buddy up with a pal who hasn't yet unlocked the level you're on? And what will keep us coming back to levels for multiplayer and co-op after we've soloed through it once? We're optimistic, but there are just too many unknowns at this early stage.

ODDS OF AWESOMENESS
5:1

FIGHT

WHAT THEY SAY "I can pick a mission that's generated dynamically on the battlefield."



WHAT THEY MEAN Objectives change depending on what you and your teammates do. If you interrogate a hostage and gain valuable intel, new missions will open up to all players based on that intel. Or, if a job calls for an engineer and no one currently fits the bill, a mission objective will pop up directing you to a location where you can change your class. And if you choose to don the overalls of an engineer, new missions will emerge for your squadmates to support and protect you while you carry out your orders.

WHAT WE SAY We love this idea. And in our very controlled, hands-off demo, it seemed absolutely fabulous. No doubt this will work swimmingly in solo play, and has huge potential for big fun in co-op with your pals. But what happens when you're among strangers and you need an engineer and no one steps up? Or what happens if everyone in your co-op game ignores their separate orders, creating chaos and leading to a breakdown in the game? If you only play with people you trust, it should work fine. But if you want to just drop into a game with strangers, it might be asking too much to expect each player to do their part. We've yet to see how Splash will address this potential conundrum.

ODDS OF AWESOMENESS
4:1

SAY WHAT?

THEY SAY IT, WE SPRAY IT



"Hey, if Activision liked it, they should have put a ring on it. Oh great, now Beyoncé is going to sue me too."

Tim Schafer, on Activision suing to block the release of his game *Brütal Legend* after they decided not to publish it themselves.



"We realized that plausibility can eat [feces] and die."

Mike Neuman of Gearbox, talking to Shacknews about *Borderlands*' style shift.



"I'm telling you. At the end of [Assassin's Creed 2] you'll say 'Holy crap, I never saw it coming.'"

Patrice Désilets, Creative Director, *Assassin's Creed 2*

"Children under five had the highest injury rate, mainly due to falls after tripping over cables or head injuries from falling monitors."

BBC News, reporting on an American Journal of Preventive Medicine study of PC-related injuries.

"The idea for World of Warcraft was originally 'We're going to make the best EverQuest that's ever been made.' Now, you can't say, 'Let's make the best WoW you could ever make.' Blizzard already did that."



Bill Roper, formerly of Blizzard, and now Design Director of *Champions Online*.

TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT IT

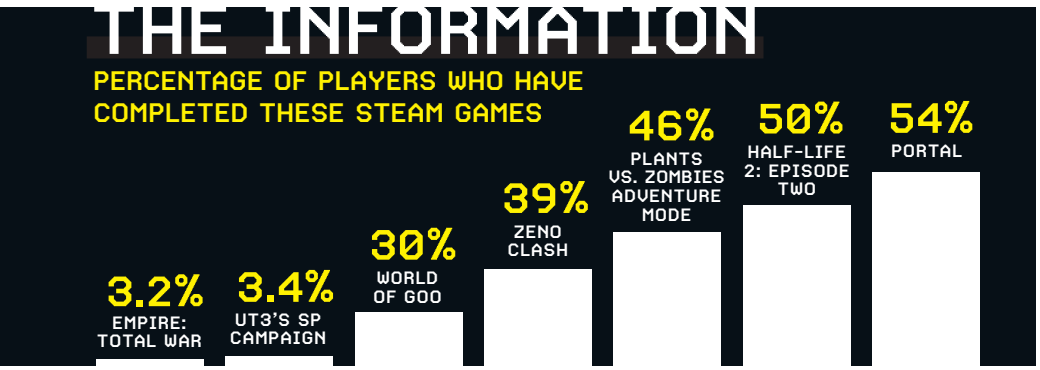
"Heavily Pirated Sims 3 Generating Record-Breaking Legit Sales"
Gamepolitics.com

"Sims 3 Sells 1.4 Million in a Week Despite Rampant Piracy"
Gossipgamers.com



THE INFORMATION

PERCENTAGE OF PLAYERS WHO HAVE COMPLETED THESE STEAM GAMES



the spy



The Excellence in Espionage Expo was a curious affair this year. Usually E3 is a warehouse district event held in an unmarked, windowless hangar, so when The Spy's taxi driver deposited him in front of a brightly lit convention center, he knew there had been a mistake. Thankfully the passersby were all too busy looking at booth babes and games to observe The Spy's confusion, which he used to his advantage.

ABANDON HOPE

First The Spy had to make his way past a protest against EA's *Dante's Inferno*, a third-person action adventure from the makers of *Dead Space*. The protest felt slightly lame: "Hell is not a Video Game," and "Trade in Your PlayStation for a PrayStation." The Spy can confirm that EA paid for the actors to show up and fake outrage. The Spy sighed and moved on, although he does have one thing to report: expect the game to eventually end up on PC.

LEFT 4 SEATTLE

The Spy picked out an interesting aside amid the annoyingly real brouhaha surrounding *Left 4 Dead 2*. The original game was developed by Turtle Rock, a California dev that Valve eventually bought up and renamed Valve South. It turns out Valve South no longer exists. The staff have apparently relocated to Seattle, except for AI guru Mike Booth. He's staying behind, but is apparently still working on an unannounced project for Valve.

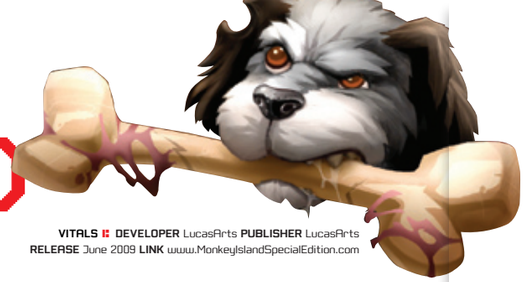
I C U

Back at E3, The Spy accidentally blundered through a curtain and saw the letters "C" and "C" and the number "4" before a bag fell over his head, and the consciousness was choked out of him. Readying an announcement about the *Command & Conquer 4*, Electronic Arts?

SPY ILLUSTRATION: DAVID LYTTLETON

THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND

A pirate's life in HD



VITALS :: **DEVELOPER** LucasArts **PUBLISHER** LucasArts
RELEASE June 2009 **LINK** www.MonkeyIslandSpecialEdition.com

Truth told, we're not at all surprised about a return to *Monkey Island*. In fact, the only thing we're surprised about is how *long* it's taken. That said, we couldn't be more pleased with how LucasArts is treating the remake of the legendary adventures of Guybrush Threepwood and his madcap quest to become a pirate. Not only are they re-imagining every scene at 1920x1080 resolution, but they've also added voiceovers for all the characters and remastered the score. All standard stuff, perhaps—but here's the kicker: You can seamlessly switch between the HD and original versions at any time, and the difference is startling. We're guessing a few purists will replay the 1990 classic adventure in its original format, while a few young 'uns may stick with the remastered version. The rest of us will be compulsively switching back and forth, comparing the old with the new. Here's a peek at what you'll find, along with commentary from producer Craig Derrick on the changes and upgrades they built into the HD version. GARY STEINMAN





DOCKS "We gave the set a more dynamic look and feel. We did this by adding a dramatic mood and scaling up the moon, making it the strong point of interest. The moon also provides a strong light source and embellishes the clouds, since they are now animated in the scene. Because this is a ship port, we added ships and cargo, as well as mid-ground elements to give a sense of depth."



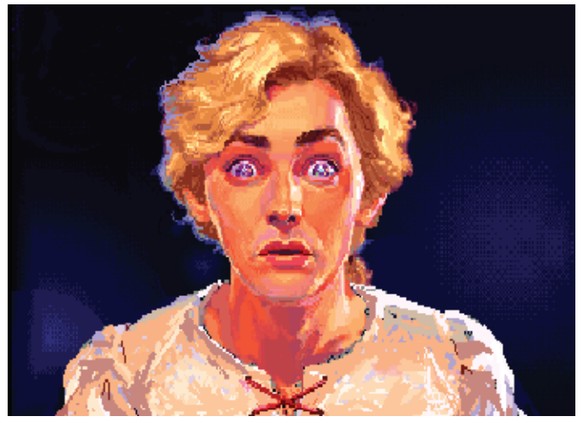


SCUMM BAR "We added texture and details to the walls. In the past, tiny pixels showed the detail, but we painted grains and cracks in the wall to tell the story that this is an old pirate bar and has been around for a long time. We re-illustrated the 19 characters in the bar and gave them dynamic shape."



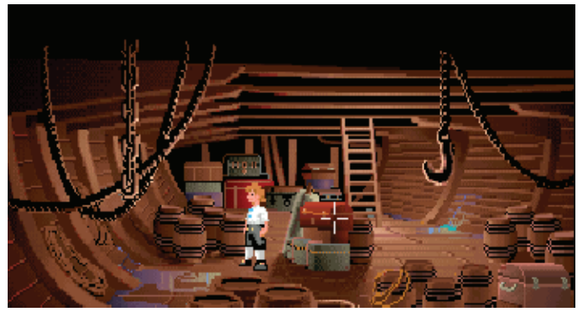


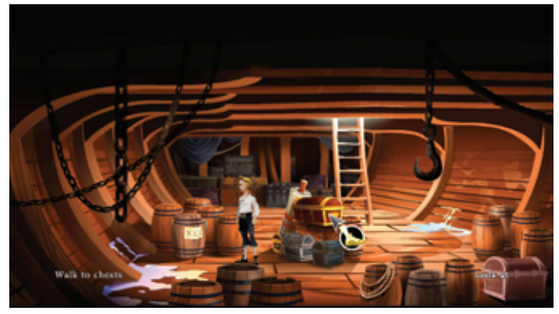
ESTEVAN THE PIRATE "We unified the character with the backgrounds and we pushed the shape of the characters to give them a lyrical storybook feel with a contemporary edge. The brush strokes that we used also reflect a very contemporary style."





GUYBRUSH THREEPWOOD "We implemented an environment in the background, where in the past the backgrounds were just a color tone. We added light and we pushed the shape to give Guybrush a more contemporary feel that was inspired by the work of Enrique Fernández and the art from DreamWorks' *Road to El Dorado*."





THE SEA MONKEY "We put lots of details into each element, all the way down to the key holes on the trunks. We hand-painted each environment digitally; we created our own set of custom brushes to create the look and feel of a contemporary medium. These are the same steps that you would take if you were to paint in a traditional way."

TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND

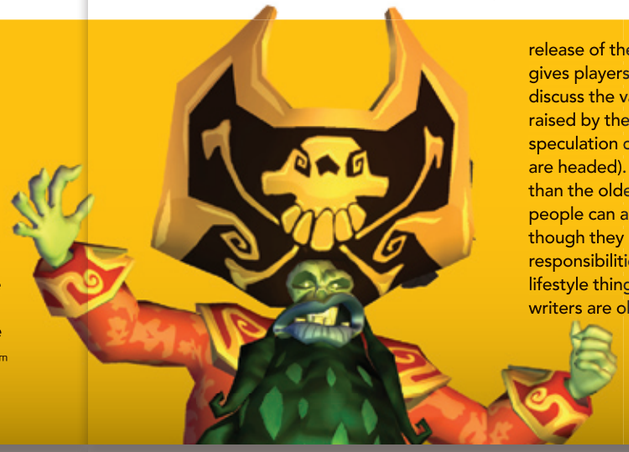
Telltale's design director Dave Grossman dishes on Guybrush's all-new episodic adventures

Why now?
I read an interview with Darrell Rodriguez somewhere in which he said "Why not now?" He's the current president of LucasArts, and I think his personal enthusiasm for their adventure game franchises has probably been a key factor in making this happen.

What was your role in the original *Monkey Island* games?
Tim Schafer and I were the "assistant designers" on the first two *Monkey Island* titles. We brainstormed and workshopped the story and puzzles with Ron Gilbert (the designer and project lead), implemented scenes using Lucas's SCUMM programming environment, and wrote the majority of the hilarious dialog.

What new are you bringing to the *Monkey Island* universe?
Principally, we're bringing our unique episodic style to the franchise. With five parts to the story, each having several acts, the experience should feel more epic than ever before. The fact that there's real time passing between the

VITALS :: **DEVELOPER** Telltale **PUBLISHER** Telltale **RELEASE** July 2009 **LINK** www.telltalegames.com



release of the chapters accentuates this, and gives players a few weeks to ruminate and discuss the various questions that have been raised by the episode (there's always plenty of speculation on our forums about where things are headed). The play is also slightly less taxing than the older-style games, scoped so that people can actually finish each chapter even though they may have jobs and kids and other responsibilities competing for their time. It's a lifestyle thing. Possibly also of note: The writers are older now, same as the audience, and are consequently bringing different perspectives to bear on the storytelling. (But don't expect Guybrush to be any wiser!)

Any special nods to fans of the original?
Absolutely! Slipping in various bits of self-referential humor has always been part of the *Monkey Island* style, and this series is no exception. Of course, the *really* serious fans will see stuff that we didn't even put in on purpose. If only we could effectively tap into all that audience imagination, we wouldn't even have to make the games at all…

MODERN WARFARE 2

ALL CHILLY'D UP

Call of Duty 4 was at its best when the safety was on: soiling my ghillie suit while army-crawling under trucks inches away from patrols in occupied Ukraine; listening in on haunting radio chatter from my co-pilots aboard an AC-130 gunship in "Death From Above"; dragging a wounded lieutenant through a hot extraction zone—even the first interactive cinematic (being shoved into a backseat en route to your own execution) stood out more than the record-skip rhythm set between my M-16 and the endless stream of enemies in *COD4*'s campaign.

But great shooters do this best—spacing (and pacing) their killin' with quietly tense moments that let players refocus. The above examples are confident evidence that Infinity Ward could craft an incredible story if they were let loose on an original IP, but Activision's got a good thing going—a game that the mainstream loves (with more than 13 million sold cross-platform), and a sustaining multiplayer space that the hardcore keeps coming back to.

The most reassuring part of our first hands-on demo with *Modern Warfare 2*, then, is how well it resembles the best *COD4* mission (All Ghillied Up). You're climbing a glacier behind "Soap" McTavish (your main character from *COD4*, and heir to Captain Price's mentor role in *MW2*), alternating mouse clicks to chunk your ice picks into the block. The frost cracks ominously with each swing. There's heavy breathing. And when we inevitably slip, Soap lunges for our forearm, willing us to the top cliff with his man-strength. Further on, when we finally pull out our M4 at the perimeter of a Russian outpost, we're not going in full-auto—we use a heartbeat monitor strapped to the stock as radar in a zero-visibility blizzard to spot isolated patrols, avoiding most of them. We selectively snipe one or two guards, and this is when we hear a keen bit of flexible dialog between ourselves and Soap. He whispers out "I've got this one," as he takes aim, but we take the shot instead. Soap professionally replies: "Nevermind."

CLIFFHANGER

These tuned, scripted moments might not surprise on a second playthrough, but they're immediately captivating at that first exposure. And of course, they're mirrored by all the throttling gunfire, the downhill snowmobile escape sequence (with pistol in hand), and a massive jet fuel tank explosion that, somewhere, forced a single tear down Michael Bay's cheek.

And that's the approach throughout, says community manager Robert Bowling. "Build the tension with the calm before the storm, as you climb your way up a towering icy cliff face before you get into a more subtle intensity of stealth through a thick blizzard with low visibility. All of which can be just as impactful as the classic intensity of a chaotic battle with explosions and bullets whizzing past your head. A good action scene is never 'turned to 11' the entire time, it's paced and structured."

It's on-rails as ever, but those rails happen to be a very fast roller-coaster…and riding beside are 30 ex-Spetznaz pointing their AKs at you during your shared journey of ascent/descent. We're awaiting a pop at multiplayer, but the highs and lows of single-player are a welcome, if expected, rhythm to see in *MW2*.

EVAN LAHTI

PRO TIPS



With multiplayer details still unknown, Joe "Nabore" Amorosa, *Call of Duty 4* captain for Team Pandemic and 15-time *COD* champion, gives us his wishlist for multiplayer tweaks and features:

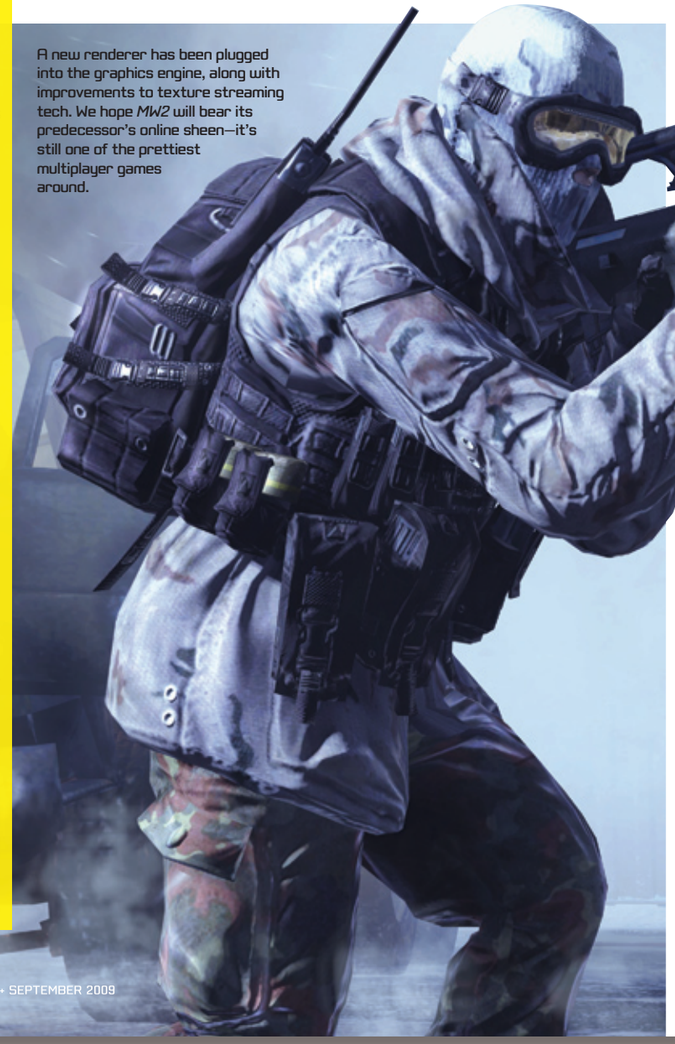
CoDTV "Allow players to watch tournament matches live from their own computer. This is a very important tool for the community because it brings casual and professional players together."

Tanks "It may be fun to blow someone up close range with a cannon, but these things need to be left out of the competitive environment."

Perks "The perks used in *Modern Warfare* and *World at War* weren't balanced. Competitive players didn't have much of an option. Most chose to use stopping power and steady aim because of their effectiveness."

Dust or Fog "It's important for the player to have no hindrance in his visuals during gameplay. Solution: allow server administrators the ability to tweak all visuals, including ambient effects like fire and smoke."

Maps "*MW2* should avoid wide-open maps. The best competitive maps were usually daytime levels (better vision) that were small to medium size, with choke points between the main lanes serving as the best combat zones (like Strike or Toujane)."



A new renderer has been plugged into the graphics engine, along with improvements to texture streaming tech. We hope *MW2* will bear its predecessor's online sheen—it's still one of the prettiest multiplayer games around.



Is it a game? Or an action movie? *Modern Warfare 2* could easily be a Hollywood blockbuster.

VITALS
DEVELOPER Infinity Ward
PUBLISHER Activision
RELEASE November 2009
LINK modernwarfare2.com

"Can this thing really outrun a Hind?" "She'll hold together, kid. This 'mobile made the Kessel run in less than 12 parsecs."







Infinity Ward wants to retain the cinematic feel of single-player, so co-op will be implemented as challege missions, like *COD4*'s "Mile High Club" epilogue.

SECTION 8

KISS CAMPING GOODBYE IN THIS FUTURISTIC SKY-FI DEATHMATCHER

We've all been there—you round a blind corner, plasma rifle in hand, and instantly receive a neck-snapping headshot. You watch your body ragdoll to the ground, note the owner of that sniper rifle in a special spot of your mind (the "cerevengebellum"), then thumb-twiddle away a penalizing 20-second timeout until you respawn. *Sigh*. Nothing spoils a good deathmatch like some wussy sniper camping from a hard-to-reach nest. Unless, that is, you're a cloud-jumping supersoldier that enters the battlefield from *the sky* (parachuteless, we might add).

Section 8 lets players relive this daring role every time they die, as Evan and I discovered in our recent playtest. When Evan sniped me from the top of a distant rock formation (like the cheap camper he is), I didn't get angry. I swapped to a close-combat Assault class at the respawn screen, then nosedove 15,000 feet out of the sky, cratering the ground beside him to introduce Evan to the barrel of my shiny shotgun. Getting revenge has never been easier—*Section 8*'s orbital drop respawn system lets players rejoin the game from any location they can glide to, chosen from an overhead map on the class-selection screen.

Well, almost any location. Enemy turrets make it risky to drop in some areas, but maps are large enough that you still have plenty of options. And players won't be the only things falling from the sky. Points earned through kills and location-captures earn airdrops of vehicles and turrets to your location.

Combat is reasonably fast-paced, resembling *Tribes* with better-focused objectives. And though the large outdoor maps favor range weapons, getting into hugging distance of an enemy is fairly easy thanks to flight and overdrive (a super sprint that lasts as long as you aren't interrupted). And if being nimble still gets you gunned down by the sharpshooter, that's when you respawn right on top of that sniper sissy and get your revenge. JOSH AUGUSTINE



A typical match will have at least 32 players.

VITALS **DEVELOPER** TimeGate Studios **PUBLISHER** SouthPeak **RELEASE** Fall 2009 **LINK** joinsection8.com

TOP SECRET GAMES

PORTAL 2 ETA: 2010

WHAT WE KNOW

Portal ended on a song called "Still Alive" sung by an evil computer named GlaDOS. But we also know Valve plans on using Cave Johnson, the dead owner of Aperture Science, as the sequel's principal antagonist. In June 2008, the developer put out a casting call asking for someone to voice the character: He'll be from the American south and, frankly, crazy. The casting call suggests he'll "lose touch with humanity" as the game progresses.

WHAT WE THINK

GlaDOS is Still Alive. Chell is also Still Alive. But Cave Johnson, according to Valve, died in the 1960s. Unless Valve sets the game before then, Cave will probably exist in Aperture Science's circuitry.



Companion cube: one of three playable races in *Portal 2*.

A GREAT DIVIDE?



THE PC-CONSOLE RIVALRY IS FAKE. STARDOCK'S BRAD WARDELL EXPLAINS WHY

VITALS

NAME: Brad Wardell

TITLE: President and CEO, Stardock

RECENT PROJECTS: *Demigod, Elemental: War of Magic*

FAVORITE STARDOCK GAME: *Galactic Civilizations II*

FAVORITE INSECT: Honeybee

FIRST COMPUTER: Commodore 64

Any traveler onto an online gaming forum will soon find an active thread that hashes out the oft-repeated battle between PCs and consoles. The console advocates argue that consoles are easier to set up and get games going—no drivers, no system requirements. And besides, console games have stronger sales than PC games, so the biggest, most expensive titles tend to show up for the console first.

The PC advocates fight back by pointing out most console sale statistics ignore the size of the MMO market, the value of mods and other features inherent to an open platform, the increasing trend to digital distribution via Steam and Impulse and a casual game market that continues to bring a seemingly never-ending supply of new PC gamers onto the scene.

Ironically, at this stage, the battle isn't really about PCs and consoles. It's really about the game-playing environment. Do I want to play a game in the living room with a gamepad or in my office with a keyboard and mouse? The difference today has almost nothing to do with technical capabilities and everything to do with arbitrary choices made by platform owners to make PCs and consoles artificially distinct.

> "Microsoft is under no real pressure to improve the Windows gaming experience"

WITH THE MOST RECENT generation of consoles, high resolution has become the standard. Yet, the Xbox 360 has no web browser and no serious keyboard or mouse support. Why must the console be stuck in the living room? Meanwhile, Microsoft Windows has Windows Media Player for movies but no support for a games explorer environment, which effectively takes it out of the living room for most gamers. On the development side, Microsoft long abandoned putting network services into DirectX on Windows, leaving game developers and publishers to cobble together their own multiplayer system or rely on a third party.

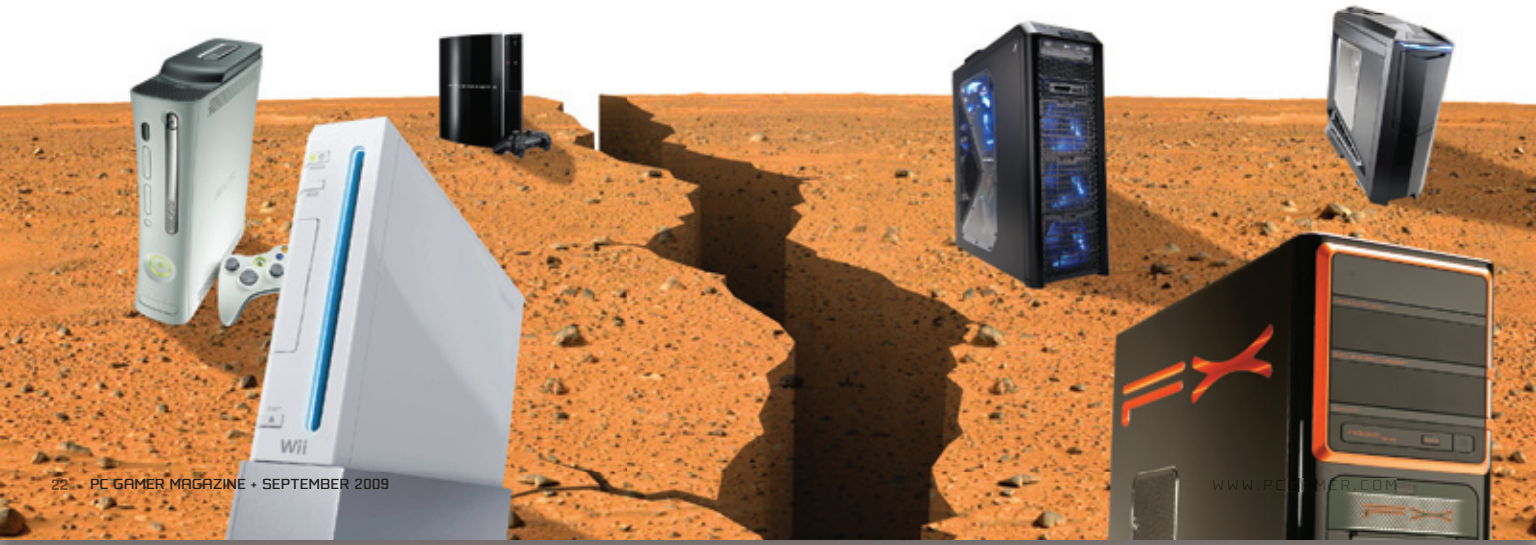
Sony and Microsoft intentionally ensure that the distinction between a PC and a console is apparent in order to protect their own interests while fans on both sides fight meaningless battles over which is "better." It would be more productive to argue whether a mouse or a gamepad is better for first-person shooters, where you have a legitimate distinction. Looking ahead, the next generation of consoles will almost certainly try to expand beyond the living room. It's too much of a low-hanging fruit not to add a decent web browser, serious support for keyboard and mouse and some basic applications. If they don't, they leave the door open to a competitor who will. One only has to look at how quickly Apple's arrival on the cell phone scene overtook consumers by adding common-sense features.

On the other hand, the PC market is harder to gauge because it boils down to whether Microsoft will integrate a meaningful Games Explorer into Media Center. Windows 7 certainly doesn't have it. That's the problem with monopolies—Microsoft is under no real pressure to improve the Windows gaming experience, except if they don't, they could end up watching Sony or Nintendo or someone else eat up a significant piece of the PC market with a console that performs much of what PCs do.

People have been predicting convergence of PCs and consoles for decades so I wouldn't count on it happening anytime soon. Just because something makes common sense doesn't mean it'll make business sense. For our company, Stardock focuses on the PC because of the freedom PC development provides. Anything we can think of, we can make into a game without having to get the approval of a console overlord.

Either way, both platforms are in good shape; they'll either merge and both will win, or they'll stay separate and live off the strengths of their gaming environment if not their gaming capabilities. But the differences at this point are increasingly artificial and unnecessary.

CRACK SHAPE: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/ALEXSL; GUSEV CRATER, MARS: NASA/JPL/CORNELL



WWW.PCGAMER.COM

AION ONLINE

THOSE WINGS AREN'T JUST AN ACCESSORY IN NCSOFT'S GORGEOUS NEW MMO



Wings will last longer in the Abyss, allowing for awesome aerial combat.

"Everyone ready to go? Who's got restraints? OK, Lani, restrain number two. I'll pull number one and let's hope that Pat doesn't aggro. Here we go!" I was pretty sure I understood what Producer Brian Knox was saying as he led our six-man group into Draupnir's Cave, an endgame dungeon in *Aion Online* that *PC Gamer* was given exclusive access to, but just in case I stayed near the exit—these enemies looked deadly.

I'd been given a few minutes to get familiar with my Spiritmaster's spells before we started, and I'd concluded that it was analogous to a Warlock in *World of Warcraft* or a Magus in *Warhammer Online*—if either of those could sprout wings and fly, chain together spell combos to produce bonus effects, and move in different directions to affect their stats (forward boosts attack, backward block, side dodge). The whole game seems to fall into the semi-familiar-with-a-twist category. Anyone who's played a fantasy RPG will feel at home with *Aion*'s basic gameplay—cast spells, swing swords, shoot arrows—but new combat mechanics and other complexities spice it up in ways that should intrigue veteran MMO players looking for a deeper combat experience.

Take the spell-chain system: After casting a simple Ice Chain spell, the now-unlocked Cold Wave spell became highlighted on my action bar, and a new floating button appeared near the center of the screen so I could keep my eyes focused on the action and still know where I was in the spell chain. I've spent hours trying to set up this type of alert system with add-ons in other MMOs! Using spell chains will not only unlock more powerful abilities, but can also yield additional benefits such as knocking the enemy back a few feet. Each core class has a few fixed spell chains available to them, but the game's Stigma system allows players to link additional spells they obtain through quests and drops, so hardcore players will still have room to mix and match spells like mad scientists to see what bonuses the different combinations produce.

Deeper into the dungeon, I got a little too close to the Naga spellcaster and was killed by her AoE attack. Thankfully Associate Producer Lani Blazier (as a DPS class, no less) came to my rescue by using a combat-resurrection stone she purchased with Abyss points.

She earned those Abyss points earlier by getting player kills and capturing objectives in the Abyss—the space between the two halves of a shattered planet filled with floating chunks of land and fortresses. This is where the PvPvE endgame takes place: the two player-factions utilize their flying powers to battle each other and a third NPC-controlled faction for control of the floating bases, artifacts and raid bosses.

Battles in the Abyss are truly epic, with NCsoft reporting hundreds of players on screen at once in a closed beta without any lag problems. The third NPC-controlled faction keeps things interesting by randomly sending dropship armies around the battlefield; the troops will then side with one faction or attack both, so enemy players may have to work together temporarily to fight off this new threat before it kills them both. If that's not epic enough, the highest ranked player in the Abyss will be turned into a huge flying raid boss with superpowerful abilities that will wreak havoc on the other faction.

Although it's hard to conceive how all that could be balanced, it's been six months since the Korean launch of *Aion*, and NCsoft assures us that the formula not only works well, but will be refined even further before the US release. JOSH AUGUSTINE



Combat effects show off the game's luscious graphics.



Take the picture quick, I can't hold this pose for long!



Best way to discipline a wild boarbeast: a sharp crack on the snout.

5 REASONS *AION* IS COOLER THAN YOUR CURRENT MMO

1



My pet in *Aion*



My pet in *WoW*

2 Sprout wings and fly anytime, even in combat

3 Fresh setting without elves and orcs

4 Beautiful graphics from an enhanced version of the CryEngine

5 Portals to enemy zones randomly appear while leveling, letting you explore and PvP there temporarily

The MMO Times-Picayune

"Khaaaan!" jokes will work in STO

After the latest movie got Trekkies debating which parallel universe *Star Trek Online* should be a part of, Cryptic released an exhaustive timeline of Star Trek's many TV series and movies, explaining exactly where its game will fit into the universe's lore. *STO* is set in the year 2409 of the "prime" Star Trek reality, after the events of all of the movies and television shows.

"I'll never leave cat form again"



For as long as Druids have been shapeshifting in *World of Warcraft*, they've been begging Blizzard to give their cat and bear forms an artistic makeover. And while the bear's mouth still appears to hang open 24/7, Blizzard made sure the beautiful new models were worth the wait. Players can choose from 10 variants on each form based on their character's race, hair and skin color.

Goodbye, Mr. Anderson...

SOE broke from its tradition of keeping servers up for all its MMOs—even when subscriber numbers dwindle—when it unplugged *Matrix Online* in late July. Dedicated redpills with active accounts were offered two months free in another SOE MMO of their choice.

Bet you didn't see this coming!

After gladiator battles were made illegal but before PvP videos were published on the internet with heavy metal soundtracks, mankind satisfied their desire to spectate deathmatches by watching violent cartoons like *Tom and Jerry* on TV. Typhoon Games (developer of *Hello Kitty Online*) hasn't given many details regarding its *Tom and Jerry* MMO, but it's expected to be released in Asia sometime next year.



Remove the rewards, remove the grind

In an attempt to keep players focused on the fun and interesting player-created story arcs in *City of Heroes*' Mission Architect system instead of grinding on skeleton missions designed to farm badges (achievements), Paragon Studios is removing almost all of the badges related to player-created content. The change should mean more fun for casual and hardcore players alike, but titles given by the badges like "Pressed the Red Button" will definitely be missed.



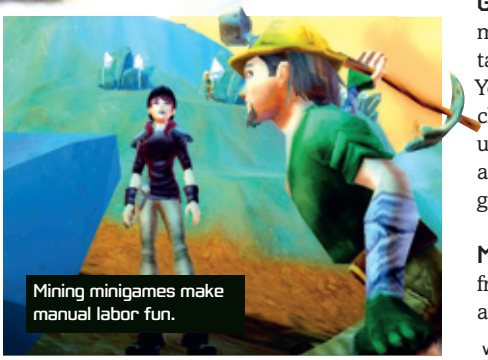
FREE REALMS

Tabitha Weaseltune: cook, miner, brawler, loon.

BECAUSE YOU'RE NEVER TOO YOUNG FOR MICROTRANSACTIONS



No sex, drugs or rock and roll, just reckless driving.



Mining minigames make manual labor fun.

Three million people can't *all* be wrong. In the first seven weeks after its release, *Free Realms*, a free-to-play MMO from the makers of *EverQuest*, has become a smash hit with the tween market, supporting a massive player base, 75 percent of which are under the age of 17 and one-third of which are female. So, even though we're, *ahem*, older than the intended audience, we couldn't help but be curious. Here's what we found when we tried it out:

GEE, THIS LOOKS FAMILIAR. Like most MMOs, *Free Realms* is a big, open fantasy world full of quest-givers and missions. You can team up with friends for quests and chat, but there are strict restrictions for the under-13s. Just remember: Whether you're a human or a fairy, if you want to fit in you'll go for face paint and fluorescent pink hair.

MAY I HIT YOU NOW? Everything from the wolves to the yetis are very polite, and wait to be asked before trying to knock you unconscious. That's right: this place is so family friendly, death isn't even in their vocabulary.

HEY, THIS IS ACTUALLY FUN!

Some minigames are specific to the different careers on offer, such as kart driver, treasure hunter and miner (which you can swap between at any time). To be a good chef, for example, you need to collect ingredients in a *Bejeweled*-style challenge, and then prepare them properly, chopping them and stirring, all against the clock.

THERE GOES YOUR ALLOWANCE.

A $4.99/month membership unlocks three different characters, leaderboards, new items and quests, plus five members-only careers to follow, such as the wizard. Or you can use Station Cash to purchase individual trinkets. And, while you can play for days without having to put your hand in your pocket, you'll soon find that the items that help you advance are for members only. RACHEL PENNY

VITALS **DEVELOPER** Sony Online Entertainment **PUBLISHER** SOE **RELEASE** Out Now **LINK** freerealms.com

Dragonica Online

A TASTY MMO SNACK

Like Chinese takeout, *Dragonica Online* is easy to enjoy but probably won't keep you satisfied for long. A free-to-play MMORPG with anime-inspired art, *Dragonica* differentiates itself from the pack with its classic 2D side-scroller beat-'em-up combat, while a clever use of the Z-axis, social elements and stats management bring the genre into the 21st century. A simple quest system keeps you moving in the right direction as you smash all manner of cute-and-cuddly foes standing in your way. Break the grind with a random platformer dungeon, or join your friends on a guild quest (i.e., raid). After an extended visit to *Dragonica*'s closed beta, we came away charmed but not yet convinced this will dominate our gaming time. Think of it as MMO-lite—great for a quick snack between other games, but not your main MMO meal. MAX MCGEE

VITALS **DEVELOPER** Barunson **PUBLISHER** THQ'ICE **RELEASE** TBA **LINK** dragonica.thqice.com





Sadly, de-aging enemies doesn't morph them into babies. Reverts are the result: blind abominations that can attack your enemies...or you.









Singularity shows shades of Raven's other sci-fi shooter, *Wolfenstein*, but we think it plays way better.

SINGULARITY

ONE GAME, TWO PERSPECTIVES

Comparisons to BioShock are inevitable. You've got your weapons in one hand, your time-shifting plasmid equivalent in the other. You've got splicer stand-ins—mutated humans called reverts, and agile mutant called "zeks." You've got a spooky horror/sci-fi vibe. And it's all set on an island that's as much a character as the protagonist himself. After an extensive hands-on session, we came away split. Here's why:

Evan, *Singularity* skeptic



TIME TRAVEL IS HARD WORK. You won't find a deadlier Rolex than *Singularity*'s Time Manipulation Device, but I'm worried about Raven's overuse of the TMD for driving basic gameplay. In our demo, I had to use an attachment called a Chronolight to reveal an item trapped in a blue energy field, then target it, extract it (but not with the TMD), then pick it up, and carry it into a fuse box on the wall to open a door. The input doesn't match the output—it's just a complicated way of executing a simple task.



BEING THIS *BIOSHOCK*-LIKE IS A DISTRACTION. From my notes: Science-gone-wrong mutant enemies. An insulated, ruined setting. Fantastic, left-handed powers fueled by a fictional energy source. Audio diaries. A pop-up, sepia-toned radio. Moody, Unreal 3 engine lighting. Action games that avoid military or conventional sci-fi settings are always welcome, but the parts being used to deliver *Singularity*'s plot are symmetrical enough to 2K's title to dull my enthusiasm.

MULTIPLAYER WON'T WORK. Zapping dozens of scary but simple enemies with the TMD is a neat way to empower the player. But transferring those asymmetrical mechanics into a multiplayer space will simply take too many compromises. The campaign's "E99 pistol" is a good example: It lets you guide a time-slowing shot with a behind-the-bullet camera, but it won't be usable online. And what if players try to time-shift the same object?

Gary, *Singularity* believer

TIME TRAVEL IS FUN! Sure, it's goofy to restore a broken crate, only to blast it to bits to get to the ammo inside. But the TMD is pretty powerful in the right hands. Instead of just rushing into a scrum with my guns a-blazing, I was able to duck behind cover, scope out the battlefield, then use my TMD to topple a building on a distant sniper, reconstruct more cover out of rubble, fast-forward a nearby soldier to his dusty doom, and build a small force of reverts (devolved, feral humans who attack whatever's closest to them) to do my dirty work for me.

MIGHT AS WELL COPY THE BEST! My notes: similar to Evan's. My reaction: the exact opposite. I adore *BioShock*, so I'm delighted to see another story-driven shooter with dual-wielded weaponry. I can't say if *Singularity* will be as good as *BioShock*—but I do know that at least one quirk from 2K's masterpiece has been fixed: It's so much quicker switching between your weapons and your plasmids...er, TMD.

SINGLE-PLAYER SUCCESS! OK, Evan—you win on the multiplayer. But I honestly don't expect to bother with the multiplayer. Instead, I'll be spending my time solo, exploring an island full of time-travel puzzles, surreal enemies and unconventional battles. I especially appreciate a game that's linear in structure but wide-open in how you get from point A to point B. *Singularity* seems set to deliver the constrained freedom I crave.

VITALS
DEVELOPER Raven
PUBLISHER Activision
RELEASE Fall 2009
LINK singularity-game.com

Homefront

WHY KAOS STUDIOS' NEXT GAME HAS US GENUINELY EXCITED ABOUT A NORTH KOREAN INVASION



We've seen a ton of war-torn settings in the past year—*HF*'s color is instantly refreshing.

HOME-COURT ADVANTAGE

The resistance isn't a hardened force, nor is it a rag-tag coalition of movie clichés. They grow plants. They use solar panels. They protect their families. Without saying a word, the passersby in your resistance camp are more believable than the interchangeable privates of other gun games. It's a boon to be fighting on classically American (but not caricatured) turf, too: baseball diamonds, mini-malls, cul-de-sacs. There's just a pinch of apocalyptic mood, but none of the tired concrete debris lining every level.

THE BEST OF KAOS' TRADEMARKS

The rugged war machines, drivable mini-tanks and RC copters were our favorite toys in KAOS' last shooter, *Frontlines: Fuel of War*. In *Homefront* we controlled Goliath—an unmanned, agile, medium tank and secret weapon for the resistance—by using a laser attachment on our rifle, pointing at who we wanted to blow up. The game's trailer also teased images of a missile-bearing Korean air drone, and though *Homefront* will be more single-player-centric, we know it'll support 32 players online, which is precisely where this near-future equipment would fit right in.

IT'S RED DAWN 2, BASICALLY

John Milius, a card-carrying NRA member and military enthusiast, is penning the story for *Homefront*. It's familiar territory for Milius, who wrote *Apocalypse Now*, *Dirty Harry* and the '80s cult action hit *Red Dawn* (the first film to be rated PG-13), which sees America overrun by a Russian occupation.

BELIEVABLE DRAMA

We don't swing these lines around casually, but our intro to *Homefront* evoked *Half-Life*'s subtly great "action-lull-action" pace. You awaken dazed in a suburban resistance camp (in a retrofitted two-story house). Minutes later, you grab an experimental assault rifle to counter a Korean assault. To push these action moments to the front, KAOS is integrating "drama engine" tech that it claims will pull in-game events toward the player, like a magnet. You're the center of attention: If an enemy APC takes a rocket, the charred chassis is likely to fly directly at you. EVAN LAHTI



Superpower who? *Homefront* starts two years into Korean occupation of the United States.

VITALS
DEVELOPER KAOS Studios
PUBLISHER THQ
RELEASE 2010
LINK homefront-game.com



The US may be the "David" in the war against Korea, but you've got Goliath: an unmanned, six-wheel demolisher you laser-guide into danger.

THE 17-WORD PREVIEW*: FRONT MISSION EVOLVED

Once a console-only Japanese turn-based strategy, now a Western-developed third-person shooter, with colossal customizable robots called wanzers.



*Everything you need to know, except why the robots are called wanzers. It's short for Wanderung Panzer, which is German for walking tank.



Can you spot all seven deer hiding in this image?

The HUNTER



Droppings be thy compass.

WE SEND OUR INTERN INTO AVALANCHE'S FREE-TO-PLAY SIM TO HUNT FOR GOOD GAME

Hunting games: a genre usually confined to an endcap at your local sporting-goods store, or an arcade cabinet in the corner of roadside greasy spoon (often with a broken pump on that plastic shotgun). That's what I was thinking when my boss assigned me the unenviable task of trying out a free-to-play sim with a generic title like *The Hunter,* but I was instead surprised to find an incredibly tense and gorgeous experience powered by the same engine as *Just Cause*. After downloading the client and launching the game through *The Hunter*'s website (www.thehunter.com), I'm given a rifle, some ammo and a license to hunt mule deer to my heart's content—but I have to track 'em first. The hunt itself is a very slow, methodical process, and I'm told I'll be lucky to even spot a deer, let alone bag it. But I've got an itchy trigger finger, which is bad news for any errant elk that might cross my path. MAX MCGEE

LOCKED 'N' LOADED

- Over 100,000 players
- $4.99/month unlocks additional items and animals
- Guns, hunting licenses, animal urine all may be purchased separately
- Game includes Mule Deer, Whitetail Deer, Turkey, Roosevelt Elk and maybe even Bigfoot
- Weapons include shotguns, rifles and revolvers
- Level up to improve your aim and tracking ability

06:00 I step out into the thicket, greeted by pouring rain—an ominous sign for the day ahead.

06:15 The rain stops and I receive today's first clue: the call of a Roosevelt Elk. I set off in tepid pursuit, careful not to spook the beast.

06:25 I feel like I'm trapped in an *Aliens* movie. The animal tracker is beeping like mad; it says the elk is right on top of me but I can't see it! My eyes dart wildly around me but everything starts to look like an elk. It's maddening.

06:28 At last, I catch a glimpse of my prey amongst the dense woodlands, but it shies away as I approach. I hurry to keep up with it.

06:37 Finally in range, I ready my rifle for the kill and take in a deep breath to steady my aim before squeezing the trigger. BOOM! The elk's blood paints the rocks as it tears off into the woods. I panic and accidentally go prone as I scramble to locate the run button.

06:44 I can't find the body anywhere. The elk shouldn't have made it this far…I must have only wounded it.

06:55 Sliding onto an open road, I spot an elk fleeing into the tree line. Was this the same elk I shot or a new one? I casually follow, feeling a bit like an interspecies stalker.

07:02 The rain is back, but stops again two minutes later. Is the rapidly changing weather a sign of the end times?

07:07 I catch up to the elk, but it's obviously not the one I wounded, so I double back to look for clues of where my elk went.

07:28 The trail is running cold. The elk could be anywhere by now—or dead. Meanwhile, the woods are taunting me with other animal calls.

08:00 I give up. I've looked everywhere; the poor creature has simply vanished! If I'd been a little less trigger happy, this wouldn't have happened. Lesson learned for next time, but I still feel guilty turning my back on an injured—or dead—animal. Dagnabbit!



CASTING LEFT 4 DEAD 2

How does Valve sculpt a survivor, or spawn a zombie? *Left 4 Dead 2* producer Chet Faliszek walks us through the dev's process for character iteration.



COACH

From JV to Varsity



1 "Coach started off with a simple concept: middle-aged high school football coach. With these sketches being done quickly, being broad helps our team understand what the artist is going after. Artists will often add visual flair to help try and convey the personality they're going after."

WE SAY: Arrows! A hint that a bow was being considered as an in-game weapon…or that Coach was borrowing from the *Team Fortress 2* Sniper's armory.

2 "After some feedback the sketch was refined, with less emphasis on sports and more on being able to see the character. Ultimately, with the facial system being important in *L4D*, we didn't want to obscure that for one of the characters."

WE SAY: Without any headgear, a whistle and the school emblem barely tells us Coach is a coach.

3+4 "The red-shirted concepts actually came later. With *L4D* we aren't just casting one character, but a cast of four. So we will often make a change in one because of another choice. We always want to try to separate the visual look for each and their vocal range. At that time there was a heavier male in the running in another role, so we were looking at what it would feel like to have a lighter coach."

WE SAY: Too plain. These guys look straight from the NCAA, but don't evoke enough personality.



5 "Using real people, we cast body models once we are done with the concepts. The concepts are rarely exactly what we are going to deliver; they are a roadmap to our final model. Voice models are almost always the last people we contact, as they need the most information to help choose them, but we always have in mind the vocal range that character will live in."

WE SAY: Coach stands out in a hungry crowd, and his bigger physique makes room for a few fat jokes in the dialogue. Instantly likeable.

VITALS **DEVELOPER** Valve **PUBLISHER** Valve **RELEASE** November 2009 **LINK** l4d.com

THE CHARGER

Building the Bicepy Hillbilly



1 "In-game, a yellow Hunter filled in for the Charger as we experimented with gameplay and artists finalized the Charger's look. One early idea had him sending survivors flying when it hit them, leading to the top-heavy Charger of design number three. Animators had a competing idea that had the special charging survivors with its enormous mutated arm."

WE SAY: A hilarious placeholder. Nice water wings, too.



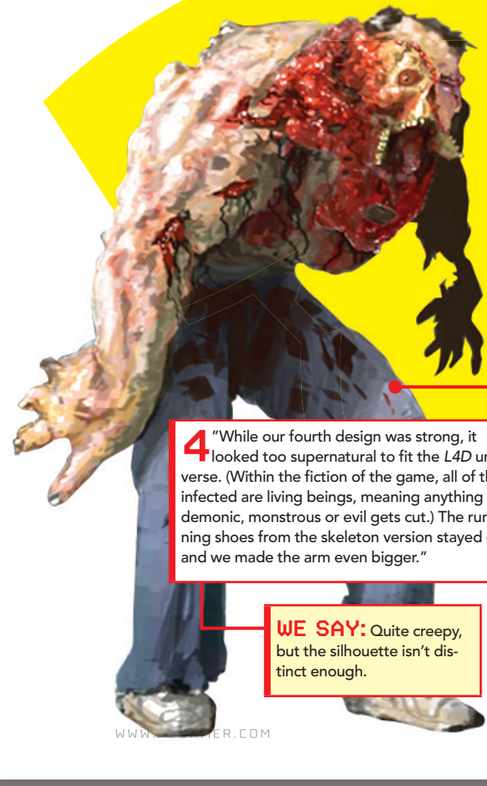
2 "Each original special infected was designed to fulfill a specific role. Once *L4D* was released, watching players in the wild made us realize we needed a tool to break up survivors who retreated into small places. Early ideas had Charger as a whirling Tasmanian devil, while another imagined him as a small, fast creature. This first concept is a mixture of these ideas."

WE SAY: Grossest tripod ever, but the concept is close—a shape that's immediately distinct from a lanky Smoker or rotund Boomer.



3 "One problem with making Survivors airborne was that any player controlling the Charger in versus mode would have a hard time tracking down whoever he sent flying before they got back up. As the gameplay evolved, a charge would cause Survivors to stumble instead, meaning these T-Rex arms wouldn't do."

WE SAY: This kidney of a man terrifies us all, but would a headbutt attack be fun to use? A strong, swingable arm makes for an easy, readable game mechanic.



4 "While our fourth design was strong, it looked too supernatural to fit the *L4D* universe. (Within the fiction of the game, all of the infected are living beings, meaning anything too demonic, monstrous or evil gets cut.) The running shoes from the skeleton version stayed on, and we made the arm even bigger."

WE SAY: Quite creepy, but the silhouette isn't distinct enough.



5 "When it comes time to do voiceover for the special infected, we actually write a script. Not of the noises they should make but of the speech situations we need to fill. Zombie wandering. Zombie alert. Zombie recognizes threat, etc."

WE SAY: Just how we like 'em: scary, southern and misshapen. The left arm looks like a fizzled matchstick—another nice touch.

DEADITORIAL

Left 4 Dead 2's announcement spawned a horde of boycotters who clawed and clamored for more free content in the original *L4D*. Hardcore (some might say diamondcore) zombie shooter enthusiast Evan Lahti sets 'em straight.



"I hate sequels."

What's that, Francis? Complaining again? I hear you, buddy. I understand why you're upset. Hey, I'd be miffed too if I wasn't being recast in *Left 4 Dead 2*—it looks great! Maybe you resent Valve for not taking its usual 12 equinoxes to develop a sequel. But you're part of the problem, friend. You, and a moaning crowd of more than 33,000 other *L4D* fans are peeved enough after the game was announced in *PC Gamer* last month (and at E3) to boycott the follow-up, refusing to buy it until Valve fulfills its initial promise for prolonged, free updates. You're not the majority (thank goodness), but you've written a manifesto (and translated it into multiple languages). You've made a forum. You've complained that the new characters seem "bland," and have qualms about the new "fiddle-based horde music." You've recorded podcasts on the topic. ...Why?

I'll admit that your thousands of friends might have good intentions: "The release of *Left 4 Dead 2* as a standalone sequel will split the communities and decrease the quality of multiplayer gaming," they warn. *L4D*'s community is robust indeed—full of modders ready to turn their tools loose on the SDK, or others that make playing as a Hunter into a parkour art, using training maps and obstacle courses to refine their ledge-hopping abilities. But will a better follow-up really *decrease* the quality of multiplayer? Valve is already talking about integrating back-compatibility with maps, and how it can add incentives to bridge the content of both games. But these olive branches shouldn't even be necessary.



"I hate paying for things."

Francis, my grumpy friend—give Valve a chance to try something new. Yes, your boss (and company founder) Gabe Newell told us that *Team Fortress 2*'s model for free updates would become *L4D*'s, and this was sensible—it suits bite-sized content updates. "We'll add more movies, more characters, more weapons, unlockables, achievements, because that's the way you continue to grow a community over time," said Newell.

But plans change, Francis. Creative types create—and even a passing glance at the promised features for *L4D2* tell us that Valve's ambitions exceeded what it could wedge into the original game for free. Think about it: They're more than *doubling* the content of the original—five campaigns, a new cast of special infected and survivors, melee weapons, new modes, new audio and voiceover, and more tools (like dynamic weather) for the director AI to play with.



"I hate change."

I don't get it, Francis. So...you're unhappy when Valve takes nine years to release *Team Fortress 2*, or two years between *Half-Life 2* episodes, but now it's too soon?



"I hate myself."

There there, France. As a wise game writer once told me: nobody loves to hate their own hobby like gamers do. Maybe it's your nature, Francis, but starting preemptive uproars and stimulating faux-solidarity behind such a blank cause should shame all gamers. When your boycottin' friends say they believe "the release of *L4D2* will make *L4D* an obsolete purchase and inferior piece of software," you're just being hard on yourself, bro. It's this kind of message-board rhetoric PC gamers shouldn't have to deal with; don't believe that instantly evaluating a few screenshots and a trailer demonstrates that you're in touch with the reality of what a game is, or should be. Calling your complaints a "manifesto" and making demands is one way of giving feedback. I might've reserved those methods for, I dunno, a hostage situation, or a political rally... but sure—if the announcement of a promising $50 piece of entertainment you haven't actually experienced warrants such official language, well, maybe you hate fun, too.

Nobody loves to hate their own hobby like gamers do



Is Valve leaving its *Left 4 Dead* community hanging by releasing a fast follow-up? Francis thinks so.



The Alchemist (in combat here) is your standard mage. Other classes include the Destroyer and an unannounced third.

TORCHLIGHT

DON'T CALL IT A DIABLO-KILLER

Ambition is a funny thing. It can propel you to great heights—but if you're not careful, it can just as easily plummet you down into the depths of obscurity. Perhaps that's why Max Schaefer is very careful about how he positions the new game being developed by his studio. It's not a hardcore game, he explains.

Nor is it meant to take on *Diablo*. This despite the fact that he and his brother Erich were two of the minds who helped create that legendary franchise. If anyone can topple on Blizzard's behemoth, why not them?

"We're shooting for the guy on the airplane, people just goofing off, people playing while waiting for their guild to get together in *WoW*," Erich chimes in. "*Torchlight* lives in parallel with those other games—it's just a fun thing to do rather than the next blockbuster."

The understatement is understandable considering the path the Schaefer brothers have taken since their days at Blizzard North. After leaving the studio they helped found over a dispute with then-parent company Vivendi, they formed Flagship, which went on to release *Hellgate: London*, a mess of a game that was arguably undone by its ambition to offer too much of…well, *everything*. Meanwhile, Flagship's Seattle studio was also working on a free-to-play MMO called *Mythos*, but that game was ultimately lost when Flagship closed its doors after running out of money.

ENTER RUNIC GAMES, which swallowed up the remains of Flagship Seattle. "Those guys were onto something great," Erich says. Soon after, Runic signed a contract with Perfect World, a purveyor of Chinese F2P MMOs that was looking to make greater in-roads into the Western market. But you won't have to a wait a full two years to play Runic's new game; before the *Torchlight* F2P MMO is released, Runic will ship a single-player offline version that will likely retail for around $20. We recently saw that game in action, and it's exactly what you'd expect looking at the screen on this page: a colorful, addictive click-fest through randomly generated dungeons.

But even though *Torchlight* isn't being built to take on *Diablo III*, will it still appeal to *Diablo II* addicts? The Schaefer brothers certainly think so. "*The Diablo II* fan will find the same kind of action, the same kind of loot game—I think it's an even better loot game because I've iterated on it so many times now," Erich promises. "But I like to see this as *Diablo* 1.5. It's smaller in scope. We're doing fewer things, but we're putting a lot of care into everything." GARY STEINMAN

VITALS **DEVELOPER** Runic **PUBLISHER** Perfect World
RELEASE October 2009 **LINK** runicgames.com

MOD SQUAD

Torchlight will ship with all of Runic's dev tools available, letting modders do everything from adjusting damage curves to crafting new quests and replacing every single piece of art in the game. "We expect the mod community to do cool things we never even thought of," Max says.

PCG REPLAYS THE GREAT GAMES OF OLD

GIANTS: CITIZEN KABUTO

BIG LAUGHS AND BIGGER GUNS, BUT LESS CHARMING WITH AGE



Save 25%
Grab *Giants: Citizen Kabuto* DRM-free from our friends at GOG.com! Enter the code "**PCGiants**" at checkout, and you'll save $1.50. (Offer valid before August 31, 2009.)

EVAN British space marines with fishbowls for skulls. Scottish-accented aliens. Homing missiles. Free-flowing open combat. A first-person *mouth cam* for eating enemies. *Giants* is the sum of some very odd parts, partly thanks to its heritage. Planet Moon Studios was a spinoff of Shiny Entertainment, a dev that brought us two equally excellent, funny action games: *Earthworm Jim* and *MDK*.

There's some classic PC charm here: I like revisiting that period of releases where something like "multiple playable races" was a touted feature, but despite its post-release praise, we haven't seen a sequel. I'd point a finger at the title—one of the most confusing (there's only *one* giant!) and sales-affecting game names of all time, not to mention an incredibly underpowered jetpack. But hey, maybe I'm spoiled by *Starsiege: Tribes*.

LOGAN Yeah, I had a similar reaction—I definitely remember being excited about *Giants* when it came out. I remember reading the manual on the way home. I remember playing it a bit, and I don't remember much after that. Now I remember why. It isn't particularly memorable.

It's funny, quirky, playful and even bawdy, but nothing about the game really stood out for me, then or now. Actually, one thing did: how poorly the game has aged. It's a fantasy game that doesn't look all that fantastic anymore. It came out at about the same time as *American McGee's Alice*, but, while it's pretty at times, overall it looks so bland and uninspired by comparison. The sound is merely adequate, too. There should be tons of atmosphere here, and there isn't.

EVAN I'd echo that. As a Mecc, you're in a vibrant world with heaps of vertical space, but doesn't feel that fun to explore—the textures are more mismatched than a centipede's socks. And audio-wise, it's almost surprising PC gaming megamusician Jeremy Soule (*Star Wars: KOTOR*, *Supreme Commander*, *Company of Heroes*) is aboard the keyboard...the atmosphere gets confused between magicy sci-fi and tropical comedy.

MAX I remember seeing the box art at my local video store and thinking to myself: "OK, there's a giant eating some sort of fairy chick, this looks like a generic, fantasy RPG affair." I was pleasantly surprised to find that this couldn't be further from the truth, and what surprised me the most was the game's humorous writing—very dark and very British. I'd imagine the humor in *Giants* would have struck a chord with my teenage funny bone had the cover not voided all interest.

JOSH The multiplayer is by far my favorite part of *Giants*; it makes me bummed that I missed the game in its heyday, when I could've actually found servers up and running. The three races play darn differently—the Sea Reapers were definitely my favorite faction with their collection of bows and sword attacks. But as a group, it creates this refreshingly asymmetrical experience. Kabuto roams around the island like he owns the place, and all the little guys have to unite to bring him down—or, more likely, pretend to unite so you can shoot a couple arrows in the Mecc's back when they turn away. Meccs can stay out of reach with flying machines, and as Sea Reapers we could easily perform hit-and-run attacks, escaping to the sea where no one could follow us. Toss in resource collection and construction of buildings and turrets and you've got half a strategy game in your deathmatch.



MONSTER MASH
The Kabuto's stompy, grab-then-eat fighting style make it play like a Japanese Kaiju beast, and rightly so: its name also refers to the traditional helmet worn by samurai.

> "OK, there's a giant eating some sort of fairy chick."

GARY Totally agreed on multiplayer. For me, it's the only reason to return to this game. That said, I only truly enjoyed myself when I became Kabuto and bullied the staff, gobbling up Meccs and Sea Reapers while stomping around the map. I guess I enjoyed it not because that kind of behavior comes naturally to me (ahem), but because it was the least strategic of the three races. The whole notion of building bases and resource management was lost to me when I played the other races, probably because it's neither robust enough to be engaging or light enough to be simple fun. It's stuck somewhere in the middle—the wrong place to be for a game like this.

LOGAN But that isn't to say Planet Moon shouldn't get lots of candy and flowers for making a game that blends humor, strategy and RPG elements with a uniquely balanced multiplayer. But it just doesn't hold up as a classic, in my opinion.

GARY I feel the same way, and I'm heartened to see that even back in the day we got it right. *Kabuto* is considered a classic by many (it won more than five game of the year awards), but *we* gave it 77, much more in line with what the game deserves. Hooray for us for never being wrong!

Released: December 2000
Developer: Planet Moon Studios
Publisher: Interplay
PC Gamer final verdict: 77% (March 2001)
What we said then: "Outrageous, innovative, hilarious—and shipped half-baked."
Get it: $6, GOG.com



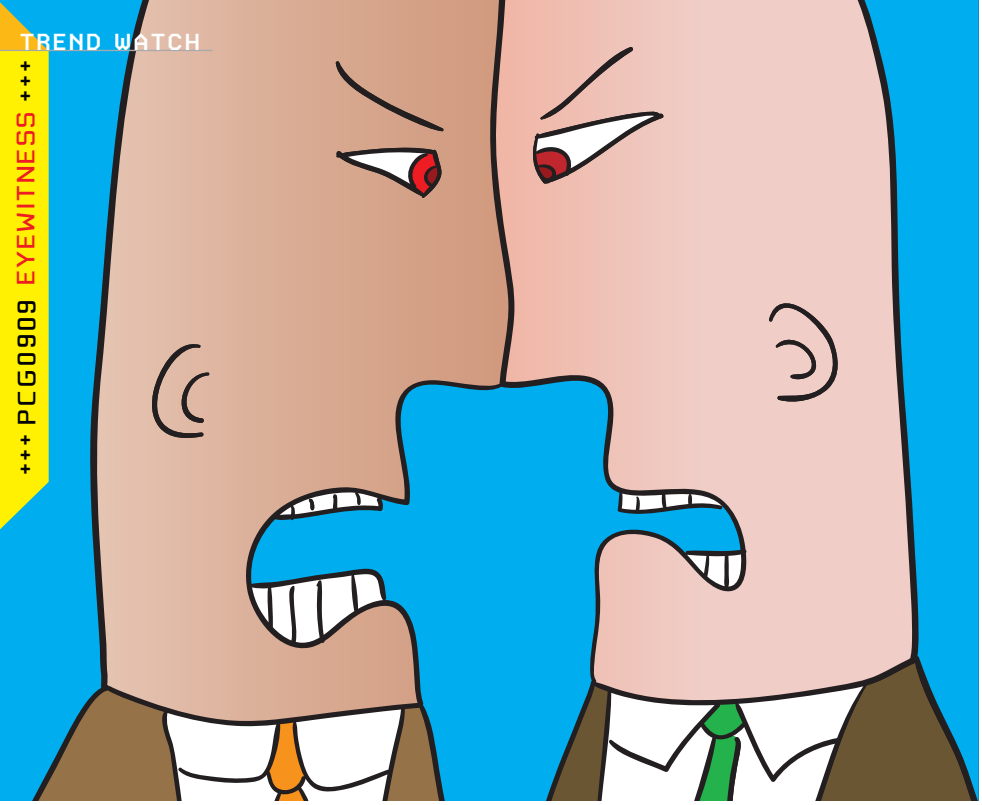








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SCREW YOU TOO

GAMES PRODUCE COURTROOM DRAMA

Like any industry with billion dollar profits, gaming produces a lot of lawsuits. Usually we're talking about tedious contractual disagreements, but the following three cases have certain details that make them substantially more fun. Including space travel. Everything is better with space travel.

VALVE VS. ACTIVISION

When Activision bought Sierra, it inherited not just development studios and games, but the company's legal woes as well. Sierra and Valve had an ongoing court dispute concerning the selling of cybercafé licenses for Valve's games; it turned out Sierra didn't have the right to do it. In arbitration, Sierra agreed to pay $2.4 million to Valve, but Activision is arguing that this deal has already been fulfilled, and that Valve was actually overpaid by $400,000. Valve disagrees.



They don't see eye-to-eye

BET ON DUKE

When 3D Realms closed their doors, Take Two was quick to state that while it didn't fund *Duke Nukem Forever*, it nonetheless retained publishing rights to the game. Now it's suing the remains of 3D Realms, claiming that the ill-fated studio "repeatedly assured Take Two and the videogaming community that it was diligently working towards completing development."

FIRED IN SPACE

The story was that Richard Garriott, lead designer of the MMO *Tabula Rasa*, sold his NCsoft stock and resigned from the company voluntarily. Not so, says Garriott. He claims NCsoft called his departure a "resignation" so it could strong-arm him into selling stock options at the risk of losing them within 90 days. Garriott says that he was actually fired while still in quarantine after returning from a jaunt in outer space, and that by being forced to sell he lost a potential $27 million.



Canned in quarantine

release meter

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING 0909

From atop the lofty towers of *PC Gamer*'s haunted castle, we bring our collective minds together in séance to gaze beyond the veil into a world yet to be—a world ruled by *Ride to Hell*'s biker gangs and trapped in *Dark Void*'s vertical combat. Once our interns collapse from the mental stress, we transcribe our visions to pass on to you, the reader. We are *PC Gamer*, and we can see the future. *—Intern McGee*

Q3 2009

Borderlands	2K
Wolfenstein	Activision
Machinarium	Amanita Design
Champions Online	Atari
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Bionic Commando	Capcom
Dark Void	Capcom
Divinity 2: Ego Draconis	CDV
DiRT 2	Codemasters
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
Battlefield: 1943	EA
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Saboteur	EA
Just Cause 2	Eidos
Mini Ninjas	Eidos
Fallen Earth	Fallen Earth
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Trine	Nobilis
Hearts of Iron III	Paradox
Section 8	SouthPeak
Edge of Twilight	SouthPeak
Mytheon	True Games
America's Army 3	U.S. Army
CrimeCraft	Vogster

Q4 2009

BioShock 2	2K
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	Activision
Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising	Codemasters
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	EA
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez
Painkiller: Resurrection	JoWood
Max Payne 3	Rockstar
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat	TBD
Left 4 Dead 2	Valve

2010

Mafia II	2k
Star Trek Online	Atari
Aliens vs. Predator	Sega
Supreme Commander 2	Square Enix
Metro 2033: The Last Refuge	TBD
Homefront	THQ
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	Tripwire
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft



KING OF THE MONSTERS
GPG gleefully shows off the new super-unit, the Cybranzilla. If you see this coming, flee in terror like a Japanese extra.

SUPREME COMMANDER 2

Bigger robots! Wilder weapons! The most strategic RTS ever made is about to get supersized

BY DAN STAPLETON

NO FEAR. NO SENTIMENTALITY.

Like any military leader worthy of his stripes, Gas Powered Games founder Chris Taylor is thinking about his next epic real-time strategy game from new angles. He's axing what didn't work in 2007's *Supreme Commander* (itself a reimagining of Taylor's 1997 release *Total Annihilation*) and ambitiously rebuilding it around the core of what made *SupCom* a brilliant strategic experience. "We really enjoy the art of game making when we're pushing in new directions and trying new things," Taylor says. "We don't want to just phone it in."

What should you expect from *Supreme Commander 2*? More giant robots, less resource management. More detailed units with memorable personality, less superfluous unit types that no one uses. More innovative technology, less CPU-crushing performance hiccups. Greater variety in settings, fewer boring, conventional battlefields. "I am not a conservative person," Taylor proclaims through a wide grin.

Yet with all that's changed, what's important remains the same. This game bears the unmistakable stamp of *Supreme Commander* DNA: *huge* armies of over-the-top robots slugging it out over land, sea and air; the trademark Strategic Zoom technology that allows you to smoothly fly from a ground-level perspective all the way up to a satellite-eye view of the entire battlefield; and the emphasis on strategy. "Strategy comes before the battle, tactics come during," Taylor explains. "And we still pride ourselves on being a very strategic game."

VITALS **DEVELOPER** Gas Powered Games **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **RELEASE** 2010 **LINK** www.gaspoweredgames.com

SUPREME COMMANDER 2

SUNDERED ALLIANCE

Twenty-five years after the end of *Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance*, in which the alien Seraphim's invasion of our galaxy was defeated, the peace enjoyed by the nationalistic United Earth Federation (UEF), the bionic Cybrans and the theocratic Illuminate (formerly known as the Aeon) is shattered when the leader of the alliance is assassinated by an unknown killer. Each faction blames the others, and the three-way conflict is inevitably reignited. "Humans are the root of the evil," says Taylor. "Even when they destroy their archenemies, they fight amongst themselves. It's sad, but unfortunately it's also true."

The three campaigns represent a major shift in GPG's storytelling. Rather than putting you in the role of the generic, nameless commander, here you play as a character from the faction you're controlling at the time. From this perspective GPG intends to portray the impact of the war on the people of the border worlds who have been peacefully living with their neighbors for decades.

Taylor is aware, however, that a story like this can drown out the fun if it's too heavy-handed. "We had to create this somewhat complex political foundation, but we don't want to over-expose the player to it," he says. "You know, like when you're watching the *Star Wars* prequel movies and they're going on about all these trade embargoes in the opening crawl when all you want is lightsaber battles, because it's an action film. We put you in the middle of a war where there's a logical reason why they're all fighting, and only tap it a little here and there. If you want to ignore it and go, 'What's my objective again? Take out that base? OK,' you can."

THEATERS OF WAR

With the stage set, we jumped into a map unlike anything seen in *SupCom*, which staged its battles across sprawling, featureless landscapes. This, in fact, was unlike anything in *any* other RTS game, but reminiscent of *Demigod*'s striking arenas. "We really like our maps as a backdrop now," says Taylor. "They're very dramatic, very *Star Wars: Episode I*-inspired. It set the bar visually for places that have this incredible architecture, so you're like 'How did they build that? Who are these people that made this?'" Those are the same question that went through my head when I saw an enormous base built into the side of a mountain hanging over a seemingly bottomless abyss. It looked tiny from our vantage point, surrounded by white, wispy clouds and a few rocky outcroppings—but zooming into the battle between defending Cybrans and attacking UEF forces on one of the landing pads revealed that it was large enough for a serious battle. Just as the Cybran assault bots and gunships appeared to be pushing back the attackers, UEF Unit Cannons based on a nearby plateau began launching reinforcements onto the platform, landing battle-ready bots that smashed the Cybran defenses.



"*Star Wars: Episode I*...set the bar visually for places that have this incredible architecture, so you're like 'How did they build that? Who are these people that made this?'"

Next, we made our way over to Borehole, a cross-shaped four-player map set in a geothermal facility situated atop a huge mine shaft that appeared to descend for miles. Peering over the edge, I could see a huge rotating fan blade blowing steam up from the planet's core. The center of this map, where the four sides intersect, will be an absolute bloodbath—strong incentive to go for an air-heavy strategy.

But the third map we visited was the biggest I've seen yet—an industrial complex made up of a series of interconnected platforms, both constructed and natural. In the campaign mission set here, several factories run amok, cranking out NPC-controlled Fatboy tanks. If you can capture them, the Fatboys will fight for you (though still under AI control). Taylor promises that this is just one of many planned unconventional missions.

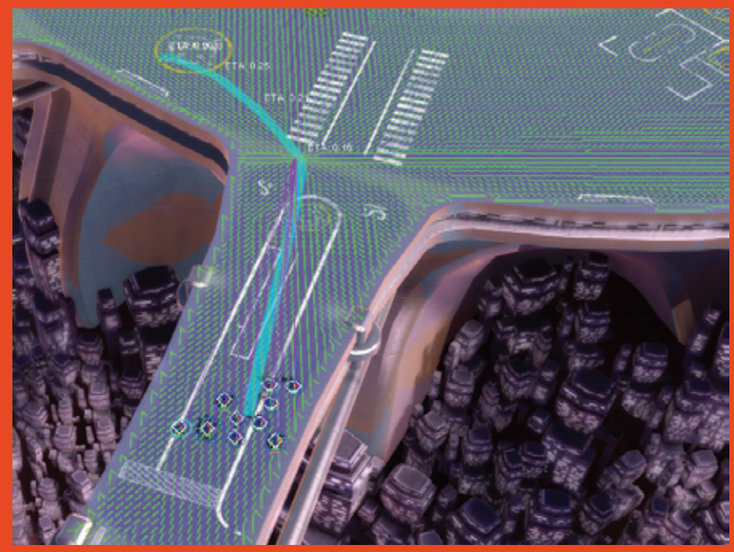


After winning the Mr. Universe pageant, the Aeon Galactic Colossus got a makeover and changed his name to the Illuminate Universal Colossus.



Chris Taylor's PC

"I've got a three-year-old machine on purpose so I can see how our games run on older hardware. My machine is actually starting to fail, and I'm replacing it with a three-year-old computer rather than a quad-core liquid-cooled whatever. Because our games need to run on more hardware than ever. Especially with the economy; we're very aware of the flattening off at the top of the hardware curve at the top of PC gaming…for now, and then it will go again. We're very sensitive to that. So, visually spectacular, but we have to do it while getting our performance requirements down. It's a conflicting set of goals."



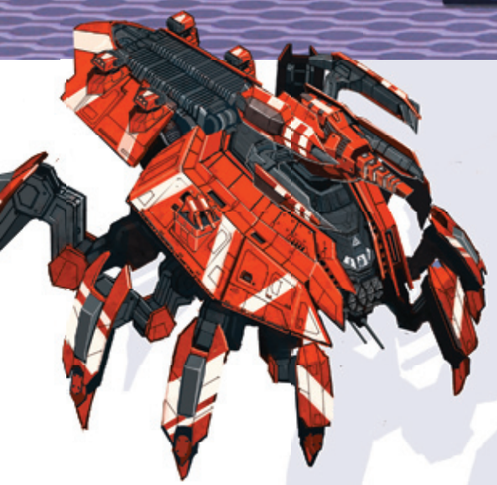
On the Right Path

Taylor is at his most enthusiastic when discussing the new technology that GPG has developed to improve gameplay. "We have a brand-new pathfinding system with a bunch of *incredibly* sophisticated gains," he says. *SupCom 2* employs an innovative new approach called Flow Field that treats the hundreds of units that roam the maps at once like particles in a fluid simulation. In demonstrations, units appeared to adjust their heading to avoid colliding with obstacles, rather than bumbling into them and then correcting. "We can do an order of magnitude more units, or we can run the same number of units at an order of magnitude less performance cost. So either way it means massive, massive battles on lower-end systems," promises Taylor. And almost as importantly (in a game with huge experimental units moving through crowds of smaller ones), big units can now easily push their allies aside to clear a path. Taylor demonstrated by driving a Fatboy though a swarm of 200 small tanks without slowing down, carving a path like a bulldozer through a crowd. "The old pathfinding technology of RTS games past would roll over and die if you tried that."



You shouldn't need a master's degree in economics to be a robot-killing general, so "dumbing down" the economy system isn't such a dumb idea at all.

Huge Cybran Megaliths lead a fierce counter-attack on the platform—and they're just *minor* experimentals.



THE PRICE OF WAR

SupCom had a complex economic system like no other game (besides *Total Annihilation*). Among other details, if you spent faster than you earned (which is easy to do), the economy grinds to a screeching halt and stalls out your war machine. "The economy unfortunately lost a lot people who were looking for a lot of action and combat, but weren't looking for a lot of economy micromanagement. For new players who got their economy into trouble, the game was ruined," says Taylor. It was just too much—players became crushed under the weight of both a complex economic system and an unrivaled level of scale and strategic control.

So, while *SupCom 2* still uses mass extractors and power generators to produce resources, the economy has been greatly simplified. For instance, in order to begin production on a unit or building, you must have all of the resources up front. (Because if there's one thing the current economic crisis has taught us, people will gleefully spend money they *don't* have.) The limit on your ability to store mass and energy has been removed, so there's no need for storage facilities. Also, engineers can no longer group up on a building project to increase production speed, so you don't have to create and control large groups of engineers to complete major projects. Build times are being rebalanced to take these changes into account, so even the most powerful artillery structures can be built in a reasonable amount of time with a single engineer.

While I was personally saddened to see so much of the unique economic mechanics stripped away, I can't argue with Taylor's call here. You shouldn't need a master's degree in economics to be a robot-killing general, so "dumbing down" the economy system isn't such a dumb idea at all.

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ACTION HERO

The Armored Command Unit (ACU) is the king of *SupCom's* chess board—if he dies, his power core goes nuclear, and in the normal game that means Game Over. That created some interesting gameplay, but it also had the effect of making players hide away their ACUs where the enemy couldn't find him, sidelining the player's avatar and one of the game's most interesting units. *SupCom 2*'s ACUs have been upgraded to encourage players to bring them into the fight.



AA GUNS: In *SupCom*, a small group of gunships or bombers could pose a real problem for an ACU. Now he can research a shoulder-mounted AA gun to fend them off.

ESCAPE POD: If it looks like all is lost, the ACU's head can pop off and fly out of danger like a bat out of hell. Back at base, it can begin constructing a replacement body.

TORPEDO LAUNCHER: He's out of his element in the water, but researching torpedoes will let him destroy ships and subs.

OVERCHARGE CANNON: The powerful arm cannon is now an unlockable upgrade.

BIG GUNS: The chest conceals a heavy gun that, when researched, turns the ACU into a mobile artillery.

HUNKER: When a battle goes south but reinforcements are on the way, the ACU can go into "hunker mode," immobilizing him but greatly increasing his armor.

JUMP JETS: The ACU is a slow, lumbering beast. To get him in and out of battle quickly, upgrade for jump jets.

Aeon to Illuminate

So why did the Aeon get a makeover so radical that it merited a name change? Taylor felt that the Aeon units were too difficult to identify on sight, so they needed a complete redesign. The new look has a sort of Jules Verne/steampunk vibe to it, which definitely makes them stand out. "I don't know what it is, but I think about The Beatles…*we all live in a yellow submarine*," says Taylor, looking at the hovering Illuminate transport. "It's got that 1960s submarine caricature. Which is fun. It's a highly identifiable image, rather than some kind of nondescript high-tech, sleek, chrome crescent."



CAREER UNITS

I have my concerns about the simplified economy, but I'm nowhere near as torn over the rehaul of the research system—that had it coming. In order to gain access to *SupCom*'s high-tech toys, players had to build a basic factory, upgrade it to the second tech "tier" to get heavier units and T2 engineers to build T2 structures, then upgrade the factory again to T3 to access the beefiest bots. Watching players interact with the system, GPG found that the game had become a race to T3 units, with the side that reached it first nearly always winning. To Taylor's dismay, this made T1 and T2 units practically irrelevant. "We found that when they hit T3, players would take all of their obsolete units and throw them away like fodder. That's not strategic! You don't take all your footmen now that you've got cavalry and throw all your footmen away. You give them a horse, you upgrade them and retrain them."

So Taylor scrapped the tiers and looked to one of his all-time favorite RTS games, *Age of Empires II*, for inspiration. Combining *AoEII*'s strengths with those of GPG's own recent *Demigod* RPG progression system, he devised a new system that he confidently describes as the future RTS model. "This is probably the single biggest change in core gameplay: the notion that you have a unit like a tank, and you can research to increase its capabilities so that the fundamental tank that you have early on in the game is the same tank you're using in the end game," says Taylor.

From *SupCom 2*'s centralized research menu, you unlock upgrades and experimental units through research (which can be purchased or earned through combat experience) across five disciplines: land, air, naval, structures and commander. Rather than rebuilding your air force from scratch every time you upgrade to new tech, you'll upgrade your existing fighters, bombers, gunships and transports. "This way you learn benefits of the tank, and then you use that tank the entire time. I really do think it's a way better approach," says Taylor. "I could be technical and tell you that it's better for the memory footprint, it's better for performance and it's better for production, but it's also better for gameplay and it's better for plumbing the depths of the game because now you have a research tree you can study. So your choices are now in your research, not in your units."



Cybran naval ships can be upgraded to sprout legs and crawl up your enemy's pantleg.

"We found that when they hit [tier 3], players would take all of their obsolete units and throw them away like fodder. That's not strategic!"



Battles like this one will put Hoth to shame. Just hope those Cybran gunships didn't bring their tow cables.

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The level of detail on even the basic units, like the UEF Rockhead tank, is miles beyond *SupCom 1*'s relatively blocky bots. Check out those sexy rivets!

Rather than rebuilding from scratch every time you upgrade to new tech, you'll upgrade existing fighters, bombers, gunships and transports.

The Little Tank That Could



1 The UEF Rockhead tank is one of the first units you'll build. It's a sturdy, dependable workhorse, but it will be quickly outclassed as new units start to roll off the assembly line.



2 Most basic tanks would be retired after a few minutes of play, but nobody puts Rocky in the corner. Upgrade his double-barrel cannon to a triple, and he's back for another round.



3 By researching all-natural supplements, you can extend the barrel length and thus the range of the Rockhead's guns to hit those hard-to-reach targets.



4 If you've outclassed him on the ground, the enemy might send in some air power. Rocky's AA gun isn't the best at knocking down enemy planes, but it'll keep him alive longer.

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SUPREME COMMANDER 2

EXPERIMENTS GONE WILD

SupCom introduced the concept of the experimental unit: enormous, over-the-top weapons of war that required massive amounts of resources to build, but could brush aside entire conventional armies. Some could even withstand a direct nuclear blast. "In *SupCom*, they were everybody's favorites," recalls Taylor. "What kills me is that I *knew* they were going to be everybody's favorites. As the game was going out the door, I was like, 'Those are going to steal the show.' And they did."

Not one to repeat a mistake, this time he's roughly tripled the number of experimental units, and made sure that you won't have to wait 40 minutes into the game to see the first one set a giant metalic foot on the battlefield. A new class of unit, the minor experimental, will open fire in the first 10 to 15 minutes. "Minor" is a subjective term—the minor E's are huge battle-dominating behemoths relative to normal units, but are themselves dwarfed by the major experimental units that will be the real game-enders. Taylor says there will be between 20 and 30 experimentals, half major and half minor. "In a perfect world all of the units would be this big, but you've got to be able to go someplace," he says.

CHANGE WE CAN BELIEVE IN

By now, nuclear detonations have surely occurred inside the heads of more than one die-hard *SupCom* fan who loves the unique economy, research system and vast unit variety of the first game. Even now, they're dashing off emails to Taylor about how he's destroying what made *SupCom*, well…*SupCom*. But for the rest of us—the vast majority—it's very welcome to see a developer own up to design decisions that diminished the game for some players. Change is always difficult, but if Chris Taylor's plans pay off, *SupCom 2* will emerge as a stronger game for it. Besides, *SupCom 2* still has more than enough uniqueness to make it impossible to confuse with any other real-time strategy game—the enormous scale, the huge armies of robots, the awesome maps and the ridiculously powerful experimental units will certainly be incomparable to anything else out there today.



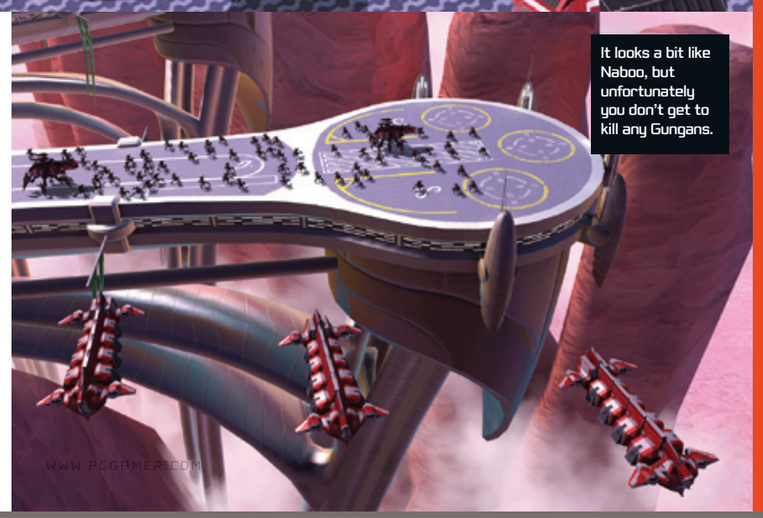
There's nothing "minor" about the firepower of the Fatboy's big guns.



Gunships are like friendships, except that they fly around and kill you. So nothing like friendships, technically.



The what's the best counter to the Cybranzilla? I'm hoping for a giant robotic moth.



It looks a bit like Naboo, but unfortunately you don't get to kill any Gungans.

Known Minor Experimentals

UEF FATBOY TANK: *(Opposite page, bottom)* The new Fatboy bears little physical resemblance to its predecessor from *SupCom*. It lacks the aircraft landing pad, mobile factory facilities and bubble shields but retains its massive size and multiple heavy, independently targeting cannons on each of its four tread struts.

UEF AC-1000 GUNSHIP: Based on the modern day AC-130 gunship (which you might know from that memorable *Call of Duty 4* mission), the AC-1000 slowly circles above its target raining down a steady stream of intense fire.



CYBRAN MEGALITH WALKER: (*See illustration on page 48)* The amphibious spider-like walker from *Forged Alliance* returns with extra legs and more firepower.

CYBRAN SOUL RIPPER II GUNSHIP: Another complete redesign, version 2.0 looks nothing like a giant floating tick, but promises to rain down just as much destruction.



ILLUMINATE URCHIWNOW: An all-new hovercraft-based weapons platform that resembles a heavily armed snail.

ILLUMINATE DARKENOID: The *Independence Day*-inspired UFO formerly known as the Czar returns, but little is yet known of its new look or capabilities.

Known Major Experimentals

UEF KING KRYPTOR: An homage to *Total Annihilation*'s unstoppable Krogoth, this massive bipedal assault bot is one of the UEF's ultimate damage-dealing weapons.

UEF UNIT CANNON: Taylor has wanted to make this one since the *TA* days: a factory built around a huge artillery structure. As it builds units, it loads them into the cannon, which launches them directly into combat over all obstacles.

CYBRAN CYBRANZILLA: (*See illustration on pages 44-45)* Dr. Brackman's most powerful creation combines Cybran bionics with Seraphim DNA to create an unstoppable fire-breathing armored beast.

ILLUMINATE UNIVERSAL COLOSSUS: (*See illustration on page 46-47)* As if *SupCom*'s Galactic Colossus assault bot wasn't powerful enough, he's gotten an upgrade for *SupCom 2*.

ILLUMINATE PULLENSMASH: Described as the perfect trap for map choke points, the Pullensmash deploys and spins up its machinery. When it reaches a high enough RPM, it will create a gravitational singularity at its center that will suck in all nearby enemy units (even pulling them out of the air!) one at a time, slamming them together and destroying them spectacularly.

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC


Since the lightsaber cauterizes as it enters and exits the body, housekeeping droids have little to be anxious about.

WORLD-EXCLUSIVE PLAYTEST

WE GO HANDS-ON WITH BIOWARE'S MMO, AND EXPLORE THE FUTURE LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE GAMING

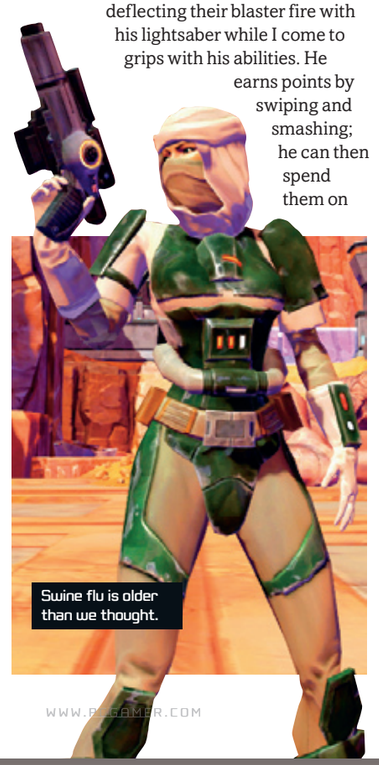
BY TIM EDWARDS

"The Sith is an action-point class. Do you play many MMO games?"

"A few."

"So he plays a bit like the rogue...oh, you've got it."

At that point, with the help of BioWare's Rich Vogel, I'm knee deep in Republic corpses, taking down wave after wave of plastic-clad troopers. My Sith character is deflecting their blaster fire with his lightsaber while I come to grips with his abilities. He earns points by swiping and smashing; he can then spend them on finishing moves. I Force-choke one foe, hanging him by his neck, watching his legs writhe in pain. As he drops to the floor, trying to catch his breath, I turn away and slide a lightsaber into his ribs.


Swine flu is older than we thought.

> A horrifying truth becomes apparent: The Old Republic is a credible World of Warcraft killer

Even at this early stage, *The Old Republic* is as polished, as playable and as slick as...that other major MMO.

Why? How? Because BioWare Austin, the studio responsible, has paid attention to the details from the very start. And its ambition seems limitless. It wants to make an MMORPG that encapsulates the essence of its single-player games: a true online sequel to classics like *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Baldur's Gate*. It wants to make a game with proficient, modern production values, fully voiced cutscenes and multi-threaded conversations. It wants to reduce the grind—removing the tedious fetch 10 and kill 20 quests that plague the genre—and tie *everything* into its story. It wants to introduce genuine consequence, giving parties of players the kind of moral choices its singleplayer games have become famous for. Except that in this world, there are no savegames, no chances to go back and see what might have happened.

Right now, this is the most exciting game in development. I'm playing in a private booth away from the crowds at E3, soloing while BioWare's lead developers watch. As the trooper slides to the floor, clutching his chest, a horrifying truth becomes apparent: *The Old Republic* is a credible *World of Warcraft* killer.

What's extraordinary is just how playable it is, even at this stage. BioWare has been playing with the working game for months, and is now smoothing the myriad details into a workable whole. "We didn't want to show the game until there was something playable," says studio co-director Rich Vogel. "We didn't even want to announce the game until we had something." And, as it turns out, the huge Austin studio has already created plenty. "The game is playable. We have a server up and running. We can play the game at home."

STRONG WITH THIS ONE

The promise is huge: an MMO that is both as intuitive as an action title and as engrossing as a story-led game. The Star Wars universe, now a few hundred years along from the events of *Knights of the Old Republic*, and thousands of years before the events of the movies, is the perfect setting for a sci-fi MMO. It's going to be as rich and deep as any MMO has ever been. But it might not have been this way.

The other studio co-director, Gordon Walton, explains that BioWare could easily have ended up making an MMO other than this one. "We had many options, and we knocked it down to two or three several times, but everything came back to *Knights of the Old*



Likely a member of the stealthy Smuggler class. Or just on a fashion shoot.

Republic. It was the right universe. We just had to make the deal, so we did."

Once that deal had been struck there was the formidable task of creating a studio of over a hundred people, which would then produce the content required to fill out a massive, multiplayer world. "BioWare Austin came in to existence in early 2006...We started the game working with only a few people. We're now a very, very large studio," says Walton. "Some of the staff came from SOE, but the early seeds were all BioWare. James (Ohlen) has some considerable experience, he was the lead designer on *Baldur's Gate*, *Baldur's Gate 2*, *Neverwinter Nights* and *KOTOR*. We knew who the high level core creative team was going be. But the key hire that wasn't settled on day one was Ohlen, because we didn't know who we would get."

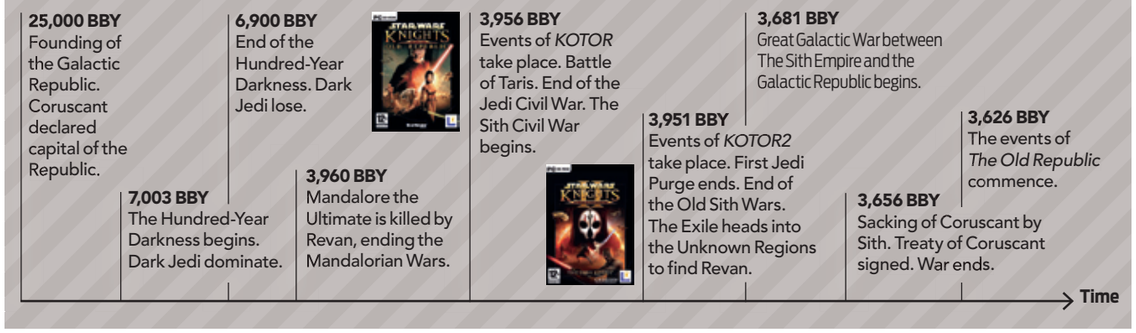
The team has both been hand-picked from the main BioWare studio in Edmonton, and recruited from the now large and experienced pool of developers who have previously worked in the MMO industry. But getting a game like this right is not just about having talented people, it's about having *loads* of talented people. "Once you go over 100 people, communicating what you're doing, and what you're trying to achieve, and how everyone's little element fits in, that becomes very difficult," says Vogel. "Get beyond a tribe and you have a problem."

And this game does encompass more than one tribe. While BioWare might have already done loads of creative work with the *KOTOR* games, it isn't entirely free to mess with the canon. Star Wars is still owned, and tightly controlled, by LucasArts. "Everything has to be cleared," Walton admits. "But it's actually been relatively smooth. Part of the decision to use the *KOTOR* era was to allow us some latitude, some freedom to get away from the films. So we're in an ideal spot. We have a lot of familiar stuff, but there's loads of freedom."

That freedom is important, because BioWare's great big innovation for MMOs is going to create massive lore headaches. BioWare intends for *The Old Republic* to be

THE OLD REPUBLIC TIMELINE

A long, long time ago...



the first successful story-driven MMO game. On the face of it, that doesn't make much sense: Surely we've been told that the player's story, not the developer's story, is the point of MMOs?

Playing *The Old Republic* rapidly defeats that twisted logic. My demo begins on the bridge of a Star Destroyer, talking to a captain who has done a very, very bad thing. In this case, a crime punishable by death.

A fully voiced cutscene follows, with the kind of dialogue choices and moral consequences that you'd usually expect from single-player role-playing games.

"I'm sorry for my failures," says the captain. "Just please, respect my crew."

At this point, I'm given a choice: kill him and promote his first officer, or let him live. The first time I play, I let the poor sap live. Then we launch the Star Destroyer into hyperspace, the better to ambush a rebel freighter.

When we arrive the freighter attacks, launching pods filled with troopers and Jedi toward our Star Destroyer. The captain assesses the problem quickly, and orders all turbolasers to track and destroy the pods. He also asks the medical bay to stand by.

> The next time around, I decide to kill the Captain. His ambitious first officer assumes command.



Now that's a bad case of crabs.



Excuse me, sir, I believe you dropped someone.

A few invaders make it through. When distress calls come from engineering, and my party fights from the bridge down through the decks, it's a fairly simple process, and we're reinforced by a steady stream of revived NPC characters, fresh from being healed by the medical droids.

CHOOSE POORLY

The next time around, I decide to kill the Captain. His ambitious first officer quickly assumes command, and immediately orders the Destroyer into hyperspace. At arrival, the pods are sent out again. My new First Officer is smug, yet inexperienced. She ignores the boarding parties and demands all fire be focused on the freighter's engines and powerbays. "If they can't move, they can't attack."

The ship is quickly overwhelmed. Distress calls come in from all decks. I have to head off immediately. The numbers are striking, particularly without the buffed and healed reinforcements from sickbay.

Rather than a group of cut-off and lonely rebels, the encounter ends with a particularly vicious Jedi.

The demo demonstrates, so very clearly, what BioWare means by choice and story. The Star Destroyer serves as an instance, like *WoW*'s dungeons, yet this wasn't simply a romp through a series of angry monsters. It was a back-and-forth through different portions of the ship. And, at any point, I could invite my mates along to help.

BioWare aims to fill *TOR* with this kind of mission to a truly extraordinary extent. Each of the six player classes will have an entirely unique, entirely separate story and series of quests. If you were to play each class in turn, you wouldn't repeat a single mission, or see a repeated location.

WORLDS OF DIFFERENCE

It gets better. Each of those campaigns is the equivalent of one of the previous *KOTOR* games—a grand adventure for each of the six character classes (see Class Acts). Each of those campaigns is fully voiced, with multiple paths (and every dialogue choice is spoken—this is probably the largest voiceover project the games industry has ever undertaken). It's a big, big, *big* game.

What BioWare is delivering is the largest expansion of detail within the Star Wars universe ever conceived. It's fleshing out one of the least detailed periods of Star Wars history, where Sith and Jedi existed in mutual antagonism for centuries—the galaxy teetering on the brink of war, having



Party play will be the highlight of *The Old Republic*.

already suffered many catastrophic conflicts, culminating in the sacking of Coruscant itself—the galactic capital.

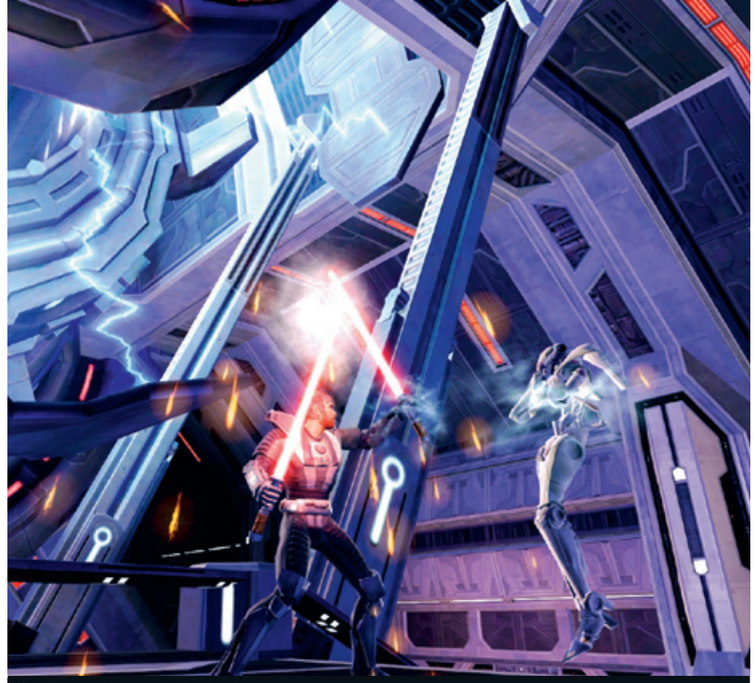
This creates a problem: most people aren't familiar with the expanded Star Wars universe. BioWare has groundwork to do, as Vogel explains: "So all this stuff we're doing around the game—the comic, the timeline videos—that's all to bring people up to speed with the setting. Millions of people have played *KOTOR* but we want millions more who have not played a *KOTOR* game to be up to speed with the setting and engaged in this universe. That's why we're doing all that stuff."

This kind of development comes naturally to BioWare after years of RPG development. They're a veritable content-building army. But their multiplayer gaming comes from a difference angle: They've had to hire staff who were more familiar with the MMO scene. Did that create problems? "Not really," says Vogel, "because even the single-player guys want to make multiplayer games, and they *want* to solve these problems."

What was more important still was that BioWare, like Valve, get a playable prototype in place as soon as is feasible, and start designing *by playing*. "We get stuff up very early, and make sure it works," says Vogel. "If something doesn't work, you just let it go as quickly as possible."

This philosophy is what has made *TOR*'s combat system so excitingly diverse. BioWare has developed different game mechanics for every character class. The Jedi and Sith are sort of melee-focused magic users, while smuggler and trooper classes will use cover to keep out of trouble, and fight with blasters. The bounty-hunter, the only other class so far revealed, can use the kinds of tools we seldom see in MMOs: a jetpack and a flamethrower. Walton explains that this was intentional: "You have to do that if you want players to have different experiences while playing together." Each of the classes has its own separate game mechanic, and each needs to be catered for within the layout of the levels. As I trundle down a Star Destroyer corridor as a Sith, I

> There's a lot of WoW fatigue. It doesn't matter how good that game is, you will get tired of it.



The Force-choke is a Sith's best move.

notice abandoned equipment lockers and crevices at the side of the room.

"Hmm. Are they for the smuggler class to hide behind?"

"Yes. It's causing a real headache for our level designers."

And all this takes place in the name of fun. BioWare wants its first MMO to be as full of life, character and story as their single-player RPGs. "We have to ignore the top of the hardcore," says Walton, talking about those players who will simply ignore the story and min-max their way to the top end of the game. "We need to make a game that is accessible to the Star Wars fan *and* the BioWare fan. Because really BioWare is a company that is about making a great RPG experience, not about making games for a hardcore MMO audience."

"We've been iterating the first ten levels, and playing and making changes based on that. You have to get the foundations right if you're going to make the entire game work. We have a person who works on balance for PvE, a person working on choreography... And fun dominates that. Balance means balancing for fun. Is it fun? Then that's how it should work."

SYNCHRONICITY

It *is* fun: Just a few minutes of combat demonstrate that. A Sith character leaping into the fray, a smuggler hanging back and using cover. "I don't know if you noticed," Vogel says, "but it's all synchronized combat. We have a synchronized animation system;



The Republic is infamous for its extremely strict leash laws.

it's not like every other MMO where it's two guys dancing, watching each other run through the animations. This is like *KOTOR*. Blades hit, we can block stuff, people are actually parrying—you always know why he hit." This combat dynamic, combined with group dynamics, will be fascinating to work with. But what if you want to join the party halfway through a mission? Isn't that going to be confusing for other players? "We actually have a system to do that. You have to decide: Either we're going to start over for you, or they could join you where you are."

"It's a fun challenge," says Vogel. It's the kind of challenge BioWare seems to relish. "There are two flavors to our design team. There are the story guys who say 'We want to make everything as detailed as a single-player game.' And then we have the hardcore MMO multiplayer guys who are always going to ask that exact question: 'Where are my guys? Where are my guys? Why can't I meet them?'"

Providing the solutions to these problems is something Walton seems confident about: "You're playing this game live, in a hostile environment, on a buggy connection, and it works because we got the best-in-industry people from all over. We have a huge amount of programming experience from different MMOs, all of whom are terrified of launch day. They have every horror story, everything to prepare for going into the launch."

EVOLVE OR DIE

That launch is going to be vital. This is BioWare's bid to reclaim its territory on the PC. "The PC is in a terrible place," says Walton, "but online is in a great place." Does he see the PC and online as separate platforms? "They are different platforms. They require different methodologies." For Walton the evolution of online gaming has created both a new format and a new gamer. "They're looking for evolution, not static. They're looking for a differentiated product. Look at *Team Fortress 2*...You have to keep bringing out content, or the game disappears after the first weeks."

Vogel chimes in at this point: "The PC industry is like the music industry: It's evolving away from a sold product to an online presence."

An online presence. There's one online presence that looms so large on the PC that it scarcely needs mentioning: *World of Warcraft*. Even when *The Old Republic* is at its most exciting I can only think back to how much I've already got out of *WoW*. Something ActiBlizzard boss Bobby Kotick once said springs to mind: Anyone intending to take on *WoW* had better have some pretty deep pockets. But do you really need a billion dollars to take down *WoW*?

Vogel laughs: "You have to be smart. You have to develop with people who have experience and understand the game." Walton is similarly upbeat: "If I was doing a fantasy RPG on the same plane as *World of Warcraft*, well, you better spend a load of money." But he doesn't see taking *WoW* on at its own game as a realistic, or even desirable goal. He argues that new MMOs need to create their own template. "I thought *Age of Conan* would be more differentiated. We were betting that both *Age of Conan* and *WAR* would have been bigger than they are, but that's down to their execution, not the market. *Age of Conan* would have really had something if they've maintained that great experience beyond the first 20 levels. What happened to that? When you get past the first 20 levels that experience went away. You can't do that, not in this climate. The market is ready for differentiation. There's a lot of *WoW* fatigue. It doesn't matter how good that game is, you're going to get tired of it."

At the end of the presentation, the point is made that what BioWare has shown is



A Bounty Hunter pulls the old aerosol can-and-lightsaber trick.

nothing like the MMOs we know of today. Where are the PvP arenas? Or the large, 25-plus player raids? Or auction houses? Or, hey, space-combat?

Vogel raises an eyebrow. "Oh, we have all that too. We're just going to wait a little bit to show you that."

That's a promise that seems too good to be true.



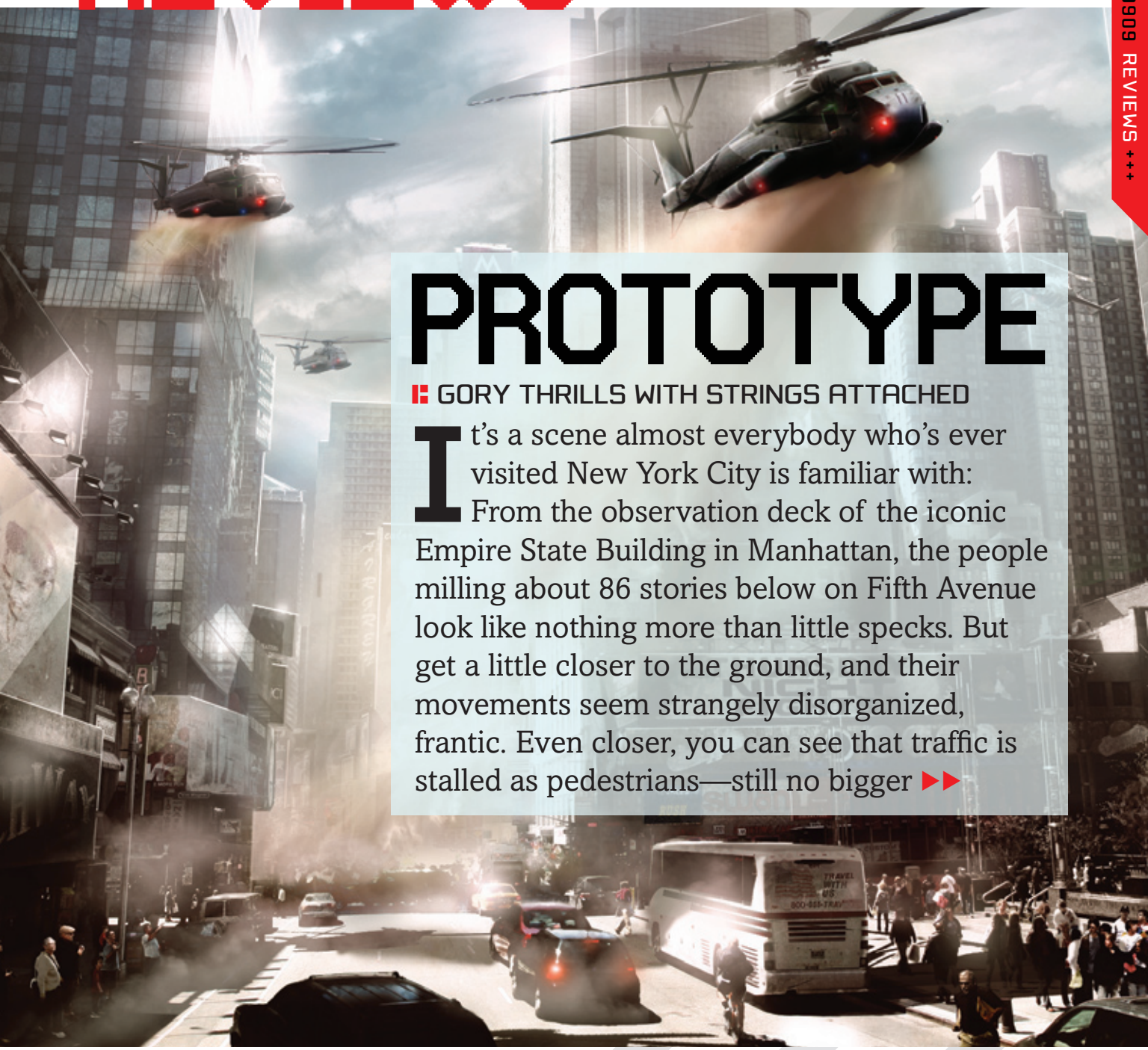
Someone feels inadequate...

CLASS ACTS

Revealed and rumored

Galactic Republic	Sith Empire
Jedi Melee and Force powers make the Jedi up-close martial masters.	**Sith** ...share some of the same powers as the Jedi, but use them for evil deeds.
Trooper The Republic soldier keeps to the back of fights, using blasters and grenades.	**Droids?** We'd love to see the Sith Trooper be an angry robot. Send in the droids!
Smuggler Think Han Solo: He pops off very accurate shots from behind cover.	**Bounty Hunter** Mercenaries who can use jetpacks and flame-throwers.
Engineer? We've yet to see a pet class in *TOR*. A droid master would be a great fit.	**Slaver?** A Sith pet class would send alien slaves into battle. No morals here.

REVIEWS



PROTOTYPE

GORY THRILLS WITH STRINGS ATTACHED

It's a scene almost everybody who's ever visited New York City is familiar with: From the observation deck of the iconic Empire State Building in Manhattan, the people milling about 86 stories below on Fifth Avenue look like nothing more than little specks. But get a little closer to the ground, and their movements seem strangely disorganized, frantic. Even closer, you can see that traffic is stalled as pedestrians—still no bigger ▶▶

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

0–30%
INTOLERABLE
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31–45%
WEAK
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46–60%
MEDIOCRE
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61–75%
FAIR
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76–89%
GOOD
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+
EDITOR'S CHOICE
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!



The Whipfist is a staggeringly powerful, beautiful and effective attack.



Alex can assume the form of anybody he consumes, though the transition isn't subtle.



Alex spots a crumpled $20 bill on the Upper East Side.



Once your health bar rises into the blue zone, you can unleash spectacular Devastator attacks.



Leap from a rooftop to hijack a helicopter and get access to quick transport and aerial missiles.



Mercer's animations are fluid and seamless as he scampers, shimmies, climbs and slides across Manhattan's skyline.



Mercer can blow spikes out of the ground to impale his enemies and amuse passersby.

▶▶ than ants—flood the streets amid the rising din of shouts and screams. Finally, at street level, it's bedlam. A car plows into a small group of pedestrians, spraying blood across the hood and slamming a few suited figures into the intersection, who promptly get up and begin clawing at the windows. There's the screech of brakes as another car is slammed into the center of the intersection by the car behind it, and a cross-town bus plows into its side. Both vehicles buckle and erupt in a shower of glass and flames, and throngs of bloodied and sooty infected zombies stagger through the rising black smoke clawing at anybody who doesn't appear to be one of them. As you scramble for safety, you hear them before you see them: two tanks come barreling down the avenue, crushing everything and everybody in their path—infected and human. They fire their cannons at pulsating boils on the side of building, out of which emerge eight-foot-tall monsters composed mainly of muscle and anger.

Mercer uses his Blade Arm to deftly cut the first wave in half at the waist

And then, Alex Mercer slams into the ground at 120mph. The impact shatters the pavement in concentric rings from corner to corner, flipping cars over like coins and sending everything on two feet tumbling backward. There's a brief silence, but soon the crowds of infected are staggering toward him, and the strike team is raining missiles down on him from ground and air. Mercer uses his Blade Arm to deftly cut the first wave in half at the waist, but he's quickly overwhelmed before the last torso hits the ground. Mercer bows his head, and suddenly thick ropes of flesh shoot out from his body, radiating in all directions and perforating everybody in sight. The tentacles retract, and Alex dashes through the corpses littering the intersection toward a building, running vertically up its side before disappearing over the roof.

Far from being a climactic battle or prelude to a boss fight, this scene is *typical* of *Prototype*, a third-person beat/shoot/slice 'n dice-'em-up that plunges you into absolute chaos at the very beginning and continues to do so throughout just about every single mission afterward. Although you begin the game with enough strength, endurance and abilities to settle just about any argument, you'll soon find yourself contending with infected hordes, military ground forces, genetic mutants and aerial strike teams. Each enemy requires a different type of physical diplomacy, and more often than not, you'll be dealing with all of them simultaneously with little opportunity to rest or regroup. Every mission in *Prototype* challenges you to cut through the chaos of a dying city using combat, evasion or subterfuge.

18 DAYS LATER

The story begins near the end, as Alex Mercer recounts to an unseen associate the past 18 days following an outbreak of a deadly infection spreading from Penn Station throughout all of Manhattan. At that time, Mercer knew nothing about himself; about his past, about why he woke up in a morgue, and certainly not about how he came to have the powers to change his shape at will and integrate other people's memories into his own by "consuming" them whole in ropy extensions of his own flesh. These memories—brief, hazy, distorted recollections that look like the opening credit sequence of the movie *Se7en*—then become a part of a special menu called the Web of Intrigue, a sort of grisly Facebook that depicts names and



Fiendish genetic mutations spawn from Hives spread throughout the city—and won't be fooled by Alex's transformations.



Once weakened, mutants can be consumed just like everyday folk for a massive boost to your health and "Evolve Points."

memories and the connections between them as biological nodes. Some characters must be consumed in order to complete certain missions, but many are optional—tasty tidbits to flesh out the story as you go along. This is a more creative way of explaining what's going on than, say, leaving PDAs everywhere, but it doesn't make the story itself—which is vintage Capcom—any more interesting.

In fact, *Prototype* plays like an excellent videogame adaptation of a television series that no one's ever seen. We get no real opportunity to become invested in characters who pop in and out of the story only long enough to perform some function and then disappear, as if they were obligatory cameos by familiar characters. And Alex Mercer himself is, bluntly, a dick. I'm not going to fault a guy for being in a bad mood after he wakes up in the morgue, but he's a sadistic murderer who's given little intelligence, less humanity and zero shading as a character. He has a two-note emotional range and only uses one and a half of them. Was there something tolerable about this guy?



Hives are entire buildings that have become factories for genetic mutants that can smell right through your disguises, so it's best to take them out whenever possible.

Oh, right. He's one of the most badass fighting machines ever depicted in a videogame. So he's got that going for him.

ADAPT OR DIE

As you complete Alex's initial missions and scarf down free-range passersby for a boost, you earn "Evolve Points" that you can cash in for a staggering catalogue of upgrades. These endow you, *Matrix*-style, with new abilities such as helicopter hijacking and the ability to summon subterranean spikes to impale your enemies, or enhance the abilities you already have, like jumping higher or gliding farther. There's no need to be choosy—I managed to unlock over 75 upgrades across categories of movement, defense, combat and vehicle handling, and more kept coming. Upgraded abilities also combine to create powerful combos and confer unexpected benefits. Properly upgraded Whipfist and Jump abilities, for example, allow Alex to vault into the air, lash the Whipfist at an attacking heli, and yank himself toward it for an easy hijack. Surprisingly, extremely well-designed keyboard and mouse controls offer a hair's advantage over a gamepad when switching between Mercer's powers. In fact, *Prototype* automatically reconfigures its screens and interface depending on which controller you use on the opening screen—this game *loves* the PC.

> He's one of the most badass fighting machines ever depicted in a videogame

Not all the missions are winners. In fact, too many of them feel like extended tutorials where you're instructed to pick off a couple of helis, after which you'll get a message to take out a couple more. After that, *look!* two more. Finally you're—oops, wait! And so on. On the one hand, *Prototype* is really a fighting game, and even the lamest mission still has you pulling off spectacular stunts and experimenting with different styles and methods. On the other hand, repetitiveness in *Prototype* will likely remind you of how inconsequential everything feels with a storytelling device as nebulous as the Web of Intrigue and characters that not even the game cares about. *Prototype* does a swell job depicting the chaos and disorder of an island of 1.5 million terrified people, but can't do much with individuals, including Mercer's sister and a woman from his past who blink in and out of the story without comment. Mercer pursues villains he's never seen. A central figure in the plot wants him dead. Why? Again—I wish I hadn't missed the TV show.



And *that's* for subprime mortgages!

And yet, there aren't many games I can think of where the end felt more like the beginning. After the climactic boss battle (like the others: spectacular, frantic but unimaginative), I'd finally mastered maneuvers with the Shield, Arm Blade and Groundspikes, as well as the alien-sea-urchin Tendril Barrage Devastator attack, but had neglected doing much with the Whipfist and never got the hang of the gruesome yet rakish Body Surf. After you've completed the 14-or-so hours of story missions, you're free to continue exploring the city and take on any of the voluminous (but largely uninspired) challenges, or you can restart the game from the beginning with all of your upgrades intact. That's an irresistible proposition, considering that well into the second half of my second play-through, I'm *still* unlocking new moves and attacks.

The name itself is a good sign. Radical's craftsmanship and keen sense of balance and timing kept *Prototype* exhilarating all the way through to the end, and then some. Combine that with missions and characters that link together in a story as well as Mercer's attacks do in combat, and the next one could be a classic. LOGAN DECKER

NEW YORK ON $5 A DAY

The inexplicable absence of a subway in *Prototype*'s Manhattan is no obstacle to Alex Mercer (pictured here taking a break from the apocalypse to catch the sights), who can go from Battery Park to Harlem in minutes by scampering across rooftops and gliding from one skyscraper to another.



Madison Square Garden



Empire State Building



Chrysler Building



Times Square

WEB OF INTRIGUE THEATER

Now Playing Although absorbing your victim's thoughts doesn't guarantee crystal-clear insights, you can glean certain specifics from the flow of sounds and images you receive.

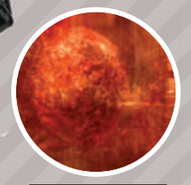




CAPTAIN DERRICK KAUFMAN
That's where I left it!



TRAVIS MORGAN
Stupid iPhone camera.



1ST LT. JAMES GOODWIN
Was the clinic appointment at 3 or 4?



DR. SHANE IVEY
Wilbur's going to be just fine!



Hammer time.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Insanely gory, open-world fighting game. **INFLUENCED BY** *GTA IV, Devil May Cry IV, RE2,* swine flu **PLAY IT ON** Quad-core 3GHz CPU, 3GB RAM, 1GB GeForce GTX 280/Radeon 4850 X2 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Just Cause* (93%) **COPY PROTECTION** CD check **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Activision **DEVELOPER** Radical **MULTIPLAYER** No **LINK** www.prototypegame.com **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

BOTTOM LINE// Dazzling, beautifully crafted and insanely vicious fighting extravaganza with tons of replay value. If only it didn't make you work so hard to understand what's going on—or to care.

0% BETTER >> 100% **86%**

++ GOOD ++



Never turn your back on an inanimate object. They're prone to possession by violent spirits.

Ghostbusters



Remember the mantra of the new Ghostbuster recruit: "If there's a steady paycheck in it, I'll believe anything you say."



"Generally you don't see that kind of behavior in a major appliance."

THE GHOSTBUSTERS CHARM CARRIES A TYPICAL ACTION GAME OVER THE FINISH LINE

It's fortunate that somebody at Terminal Reality understands exactly what made the *Ghostbusters* films so entertaining. While the publisher is keen to play up the roles of Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis—who both contributed to the script and did the relevant voice acting—this is very much Terminal Reality's take on the legend.

The game is told from your perspective as a rookie in the Ghostbusters team, in a story that follows on from the films. The Ghostbusters are a kind of extermination service, taking out supernatural horrors across Manhattan. Unfortunately for them, Gozer is back, and this time he/she/it is raising all kinds of cartoon nightmare manifestations across the city. Leaving in Ecto-1, you head out for some third-person ghost-capturing action, encountering unhappy hotel managers, petty bureaucrats, ghostly librarians and colossal Stay Puft apparitions along the way. Terminal Reality's eye for detail is fantastic, observed as marshmallow hellhounds explode with soft goo and elegant lighting fixtures tear themselves from hotel walls to become animated spider enemies.

PROTON-PACKED

The strongest asset in the game is the fact that it gets the proton-pack beam weapons so right. You start out by softening up your targets with the first mode of the beam, and when they've been suitably battered you grab them with a gravity-gun mode and drag them to the trap—which you or one of your team is able to deploy at any time. That's one of the great things about this game: You're rarely left to your own devices, and usually busting alongside Peter, Ray, Egon or Wilson, all voiced by the original actors.

This makes for some great pitched battles, with you rushing around fighting ghosts while the team pick each other up when they're slimed or stunned or otherwise incapacitated by a spectral cast of screaming, flaming nasties. This provides you with a safety net: While you can fail a mission if everyone is knocked down, there's usually a second chance to be saved from Game Over by a CPU-controlled Venkman or Spengler.

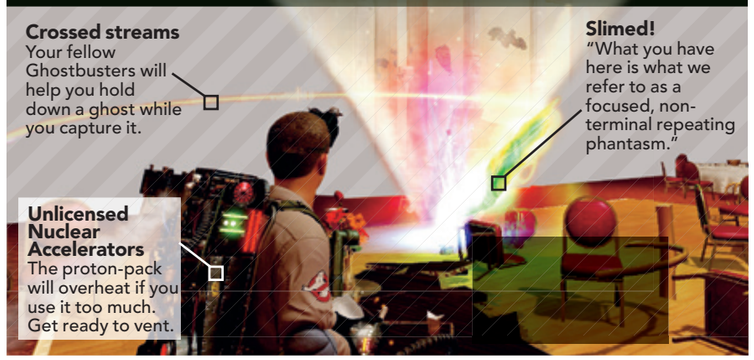
As your career progresses, your armory expands to include plenty of pack-based pseudo-science powers that weren't featured in the films. You can also pump up your abilities by spending money ("No job is too big, no fee is too big!") to make proton-pack use even easier, and to make it less of a task to wrestle your foe into the trap.

So there's much to be said in favor of this game: it's funny, approachable and only has a few framerate issues on older graphics cards. That said, it's also incredibly by-the-book. If you were going to make a *Ghostbusters* game in the exact tradition of both the films, and of movie-to-game licenses generally, then you'd do it like this. The consequence is that this is a tightly linear game that depends wholly on the repeated use of the ghost-capturing sequence. This is initially a rather novel experience that seems fresh and funny next to years of shoot-'til-dead action games built along the same lines, but it struggles to hold up the entire game. Thankfully some of the setpieces are spectacular—the Stay Puft giant on the side of a skyscraper, for example—and the dialogue is sharp enough for it to endure.

While it's hard to genuinely recommend a game that's as mechanically unambitious as this, it's nevertheless bubbling with charm, and serves as a lively reminder of just how original and silly the blockbusting film really was. JIM ROSSIGNOL

THE BOX, THE BOX!

The metaphysics of the ghost trap





"We've been going about this all wrong. He's a sailor, he's in New York...we get this guy laid, we won't have any trouble."



"I think we'd better split up." "Yeah, we can cause more damage that way."

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Game sequel to the *Ghostbusters* films, voice-acted by the original cast and developed by the team behind *BloodRayne*. **INFLUENCED BY** A long legacy of third-person action licenses, but not in a bad way. **PLAY IT ON** P4 3GHz, 2GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 3850 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Psychonauts* (87%) **COPY PROTECTION** Five activation limit **EXPECT TO PAY** $30 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Atari **DEVELOPER** Terminal Reality **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** ghostbustersgame.com **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Though limited and repetitious, *Ghostbusters* is remarkably entertaining thanks to the comedic spark of the original movie cast and writers.

0% BETTER >> 100% **75%**

++ FAIR ++



The eternal battle between unnatural videogame boobs and the laws of physics continues.

Damnation

BIG IDEAS AND A STRONG SETTING SUCCUMB TO AN UPRISING OF SMALL-SCALE PROBLEMS

Damn it indeed. There's nothing sadder than seeing a game that could have been awesome go rancid. In *Damnation*'s case, the promise was of an almighty hybrid of *Prince of Persia* and *Gears of War*, all wrapped in towering levels and endless vistas that make the likes of *Assassin's Creed* and *Crysis* feel positively claustrophobic. Wow. Pretty damn ambitious for a game that started out as an *Unreal* mod.

For a few brief minutes at the start, it almost looks like it might pull it off. The levels laid out for your Civil War ninja and his dodgily dressed ladyfriends to shoot and backflip through are beautiful, and rarely anything but stunning in scale. True, you have about as much genuine freedom to explore as a double-amputee nailed to a treadmill by the stumps, but at least you can approach many of the encounters from multiple directions—diving in through a window, finding high ground to snipe from, or using magic to see enemies through walls. And when it flows properly, it's even fun.


Bah. I knew I should have bought the "No Shooting Barrels" sign too!

GUN. FOOT. AIM. FIRE.

Unfortunately, everything between those rare moments is nothing short of an exercise in frustration—and not the good kind (a.k.a. challenge). No, we're talking the kind of red-faced, foot-stamping fury that makes you want to hammer your face into your keyboard until the letters QWERTY are imprinted backward on your very soul. And that's just at the start. The more you play, the more hope dies.

Combat is a particular nightmare. It's never much fun, thanks to the terrible AI and pathetic weapons, but it becomes absolute torture when enemies start taking you out with a couple of lucky hits. You get checkpoints, but they seem to take a sick delight in punting you back as far as they can, forcing you to redo huge chunks of level that weren't particularly interesting the first time around. The same jumps. The same dialogue. The same cutscenes.

The unimaginative platforming fares little better, although at least here when you screw up a jump, *Damnation* puts you right back to have another go. These segments are ruined mostly thanks to small annoyances that individually wouldn't be a big deal, but gather together into a steaming pile of hate. Glitched jumps. Useless AI. Clumsy controls, both in terms of responsiveness and perpetual annoyances (such as wall-jumping not working if you run at the wall instead of just walking into it). All this starts out annoying. The millionth time the bloody checkpoints make you replay the same sequence, it becomes pure unleaded psycho fuel.

Damnation is proof positive that the little things matter. Sweeping ambition is all very well, but it's the minute-by-minute action that really counts, and that's where salvation simply isn't an option.

RICHARD COBBETT

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A huge-scale platform/shooter hybrid set in an alternate universe American Civil War. **INFLUENCED BY** *Gears of War*, *Prince of Persia* **PLAY IT ON** 2.8GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8800GTX/Radeon 4850 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Assassin's Creed* (80%) **COPY PROTECTION** SecuROM **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Codemasters **DEVELOPER** Blue Omega Entertainment **MULTIPLAYER** Co-op and Versus **LINK** snipurl.com/jhn59 **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

The big picture is impressive, but if the devil is in the details, this is his pitchfork jabbed right up your fundament.

0% BETTER >> 100% **46%**

++ MEDIOCRE ++



The people of the Empire live decadent lives. That's as good a reason as any to kill them all.

Overlord II

IT'S NOT EASY BEING BAD, BUT IT IS THE BEST PART

The last time we were given an army of minions and told to loose destruction upon the world, the result was far too *nice*. To be truly wicked, the odd baby seal *has to die*.

This time the game understands: as the Overlord's son fighting the Glorious Empire (pastiche Romans) for control of faux-fantasy realms, you finally get to be dreadful.

As before, you're accompanied by an ever-increasing pack of Gremlin-like minions, in packs of up to 50. They can be sent off to destroy, attack, loot and bring back anything nearby with one button, or directly controlled by "sweeping" them with an analogue stick or the mouse. They can also be controlled in teams, their abilities applied to solving puzzles. And this time, you can occasionally possess them, opening up further challenges.

Quests teleport you to where you can begin the business of removing the Empire—and smashing, stealing and beating up everything you meet. And this time, *everything*. Gone are the days of carrying people's shopping—here you can enslave or kill. This choice decides your alignment, Damnation or Destruction, which in turn decides in which field of magic you will dominate. Save the village, then burn down every building and murder every citizen, if you wish. Along with every rabbit, gnome, parrot and indeed, baby seal. It's surprisingly dark.

TOO MUCH, IN FORMATION

Much of *Overlord II* is great. Taking on the Empire's soldiers in their formations, for example, is a difficult fight: take out their captain, reduce their morale, and they'll break up, finally becoming vulnerable.

Far too much, however, isn't quite right. The spasmodic and clumsy minion sweeping is made maddening when the camera randomly flips 180 degrees at the moments you most want to see in front of you.

The Dark Tower is a disaster. Here you can forge new weapons, level-up your minions and appease your mistresses, but only after achingly tedious jogs and load points through the labyrinthine passageways. Half what it offers makes no perceivable difference. The whole thing would work infinitely better as a menu.



Sauron called—he wants his look back.



Castles: more fun when attacked by dinosaurs.

Here's me and the gang in Italy last summer. This is totally going up on Bork's Facebook page.

MINION DOMINION

A handy guide to your helpers

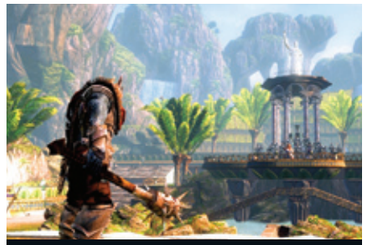


BROWN
You begin with the browns, ideal for pinning enemies down and general grunt work. Look excellent on their wolves.

RED
These fiery beasts throw fireballs, and are able to cross paths of flame that would burn you or the other minions.

BLUE
Better late than never, they have the power to resurrect the fallen, as well as swim. Kind of like minion lifeguards.

GREEN
Sneaky, stealthy greens can turn invisible, and possess a handy backstab. Sic them onto unwitting enemies.



Give it up for the consistently superb level design. The whole game looks beautiful.

There are some structural problems, too. The different color minions are unlocked slowly, and you don't get the Blues until at least 10 hours in, by which time their ability to resurrect fallen minions is superfluous. Minions' color-specific mounts open up clever new tactics. Reds on salamanders can roll up slopes and perform aerial attacks, Greens on spiders can run up certain walls to reach distant switches. This proves great fun. However, these are often linked to piss-poor boss fights, where the game's clumsiness is in full effect. None are especially difficult, but each is a giant pain in the bum.

> Perhaps most importantly, the evil genuinely feels evil

And talking of bums, *Overlord*'s sense of humor isn't exactly what you'd call sophisticated. Pissing and puking is the primary focus of entertainment, with the same empty lines repeated ad nauseam. Worse is the incessant voice of a guide in your head, irritating beyond words—his constant jabbering certainly rationalizes the Overlord's fury.

If only it were less clumsy, and less prone to such idiocy as not putting checkpoints after boss fights (oh, the rage). And if only it would occasionally *shut up*. Because so much is very smart. The puzzles are well conceived, and on an impressive scale. Destroying stuff with the minions can be joyous. And perhaps most importantly, the evil genuinely feels *evil*. It's unfair that such a varied and gorgeously designed game world so often feels so humdrum. JOHN WALKER

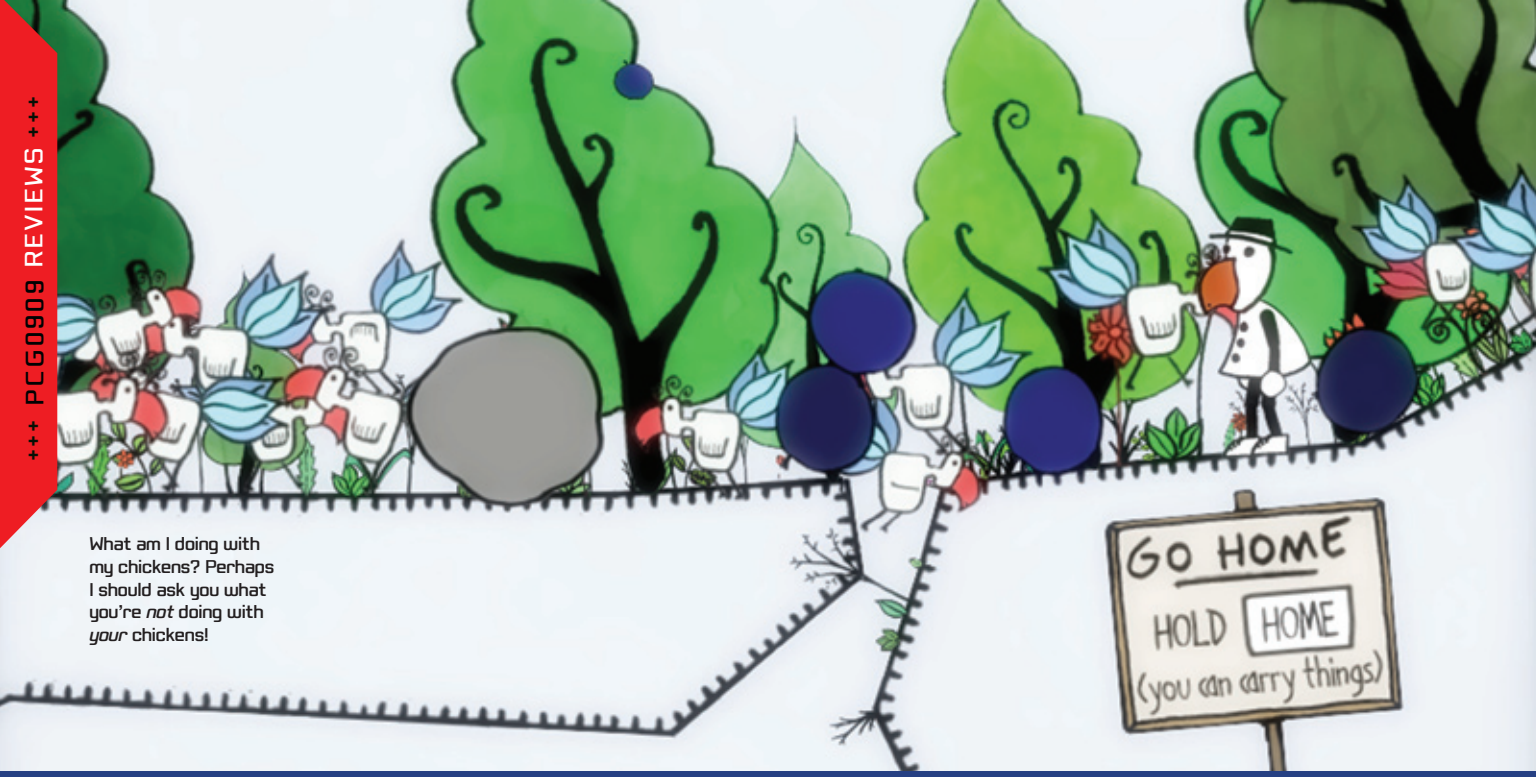
FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

This crueler sequel is bursting with evil potential, but the fun is dragged down by too much slogging and nonsensical design.

0% BETTER >> 100% **77%**

++ GOOD ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A third-person action adventure putting you in control of a gang of troublesome beasties. **INFLUENCED BY** *Gremlins*, *Dungeon Keeper* **PLAY IT ON** 2.4GHz dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB 8800GT/Radeon 3850 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Psychonauts* (89%) **COPY PROTECTION** SecuROM **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Codemasters **DEVELOPER** Triumph Studios **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** snipurl.com/isgpg **ESRB** T



What am I doing with my chickens? Perhaps I should ask you what you're *not* doing with *your* chickens!

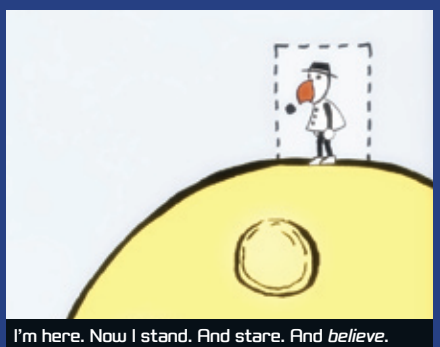
Blueberry Garden

BUT WHAT DOES IT *MEAN*? HOW THE HECK WOULD I KNOW!

Playing *Blueberry Garden* reminds me a bit of my first kiss: It starts off fumbly and awkward, but once I got the hang of it, I ended up having an utterly unforgettable experience.

It's a bold comparison, but this gem of an indie project earns it. Just to be clear: This is not because of any gameplay innovation. In that realm, *Blueberry* has nothing new to offer. Like many indie projects, it's a straightforward reskinning of the standard 2D platformer. You move left; you move right. You pick things up; you eat them. You jump. You fly.

But it's the act of exploring this exquisitely minimalist world that captivated me. *Blueberry* begins with a cryptic peek at a running faucet, then drops you into its simple line-drawn world in the form of a porkpie-wearing, big-beaked birdman. Aside from a few signposts instructing you on the bare minimum of what to do, the game shares nothing else. It's up to you to figure it out.



I'm here. Now I stand. And stare. And *believe*.

And that's where the awkward, fumbly part kicks in. Most likely, you won't get it right at first. You'll wander aimlessly. You'll run into large, everyday objects that are mysteriously strewn about the world, and when you touch them they'll warp back to a central location, stacking ever higher on top of each other. You'll stumble across bug-like critters, flittering birds, maybe even a solitary moose. You'll pick up different fruit and you'll eat them, not quite sure what their exact effect is. Then you'll drown.

If you're like me, you might step away from *Blueberry* at this point. Perhaps you'll switch to a "real" game. Whatever. But something about *Blueberry* will stick in your brain, and the next day you'll play it again. This time, you'll have a better idea of what to do—you'll piece it all together, finishing *Blueberry* on your next try.

I don't want to give anything else away—



Turn off the water, then go to the moon.

the brief journey of discovery is exactly what this game is about. Suffice to say that when you complete *Blueberry*, you'll be glad to have spent a measly $5 on something that yields a mere couple of hours of playtime at the most. Sure, I expect to pop in now and again, if only to see if I can find anything new in a hidden corner of this wee world, or to hear the melancholy piano chords tinkling in the background. But like that first kiss, the magic is in the moment—and the memory will last a lifetime. GARY STEINMAN

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A short but exceedingly sweet indie project that's less about innovation, more about crafting an unforgettable experience.

0% BETTER >> 100% **86%**

++ GOOD ++

VITALS :: WHAT IS IT? Someone left the water running. Why? We still don't know. **INFLUENCED BY** Mario—after he went back to a Swedish university for his M.F.A. **PLAY IT ON** P4, 2.6 GHz, 1 GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 7600/Radeon HD2600 **ALTERNATIVELY** *And Yet It Moves* [86%] **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **EXPECT TO PAY** $5 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Erik Svedäng **DEVELOPER** Erik Svedäng **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** eriksvedang.wordpress.com **ESRB** N/A



Hey hey hey—this ain't *Call of Juarez: Brokeback Mountain*. Respect the personal space boundaries, cowboy!

Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood

AUTHENTICITY

Grading *BiB*'s wild west experience



WEAPONS
If it kills, you've got it. Including halitosis. **A+**



MANLINESS
Gravelly voices? These guys pave roads with a word. **A**



SEXISM
Whores and damsels, but not one sexy schoolmarm. **C**



RACISM
Big Chief Running Gag say "How." We reply "Fried." **B+**

IT'S BROTHER VS. BROTHER—THE TWO TOUGHEST OUTLAWS EVER TO RIDE THE WEST GO TO WAR

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for I am *f&@ing awesome*. If the mark of a good western first-person shooter is making you feel like the most badass gunslinger this side of Tucson, *Bound in Blood* is the best yet. It's also a massive improvement on the 2006 original.

Chances are you never played that, which is a shame. *Call of Juarez* was, if not a genuine diamond in the rough, at least a pleasant enough cubic zirconia. It had a decent story and solid shooting, marred mostly by god-awful stealth sequences and infuriating stop-start action. All that's gone for this prequel, replaced with action closer to *Call of Duty* than *Juarez*. It's explosive set-piece after explosive set-piece, all wrapped in a cliché-soaked but effective story of two brothers torn apart by greed, ambition and betrayal.

Oh, and a pretty girl, of course.

Lovesick or not, both brothers are raging death machines to the end. As outlaw Thomas McCall, you spit testosterone, chew bullets and bathe in a spittoon. His older sibling Ray makes him look like a snivelling little wimp, taking on mobs of angry locals like a cranky bulletproof tank. Most levels give you a straight choice of who to play, with the second brother acting as wingman. As the agile one, Thomas is all about clambering around the scenery with a lasso and taking out enemies at a distance with a well-placed rifle shot. Ray excels up close, kicking down doors and unleashing hell with his six-shooters and a fistful of sizzling dynamite.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Betrayal and backstabbing in the Old West in a prequel to the underrated western FPS *Call of Juarez*. **INFLUENCED BY** *Gun* **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo, 512MB 3D card, 4GB RAM **ALTERNATIVELY** *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (91%) **COPY PROTECTION** CD key for multiplayer **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Techland **MULTIPLAYER** 2-12 player, Deathmatch/team based **LINK** callofjuarez.ubi.com **ESRB** M

> You spit testosterone, chew bullets and bathe in a spittoon



It's like *Mad Dog McCree*, except it scored 80 percent better.

BROTHERS IN BLOOD

These differences work well, but only up to a point. The levels and story are the same regardless of which brother you choose each stage, making it a choice of playing style. Only occasionally does your path notably change due to your character's specialist skills, and even then, rarely for long, with many of the differences between the two ending up oddly ignored. Thomas is meant to be able to use stealth and hurl knives for silent kills, for instance, but aside from the tutorial bit to show you how to do it, it's largely forgotten in favor of zero-subtlety assaults. On Ray's side, the cover system is fiddly and irritating, especially since you can usually get away with just ducking behind a box while your health magically recharges.

Luckily, the standard combat is satisfying enough that this doesn't matter. The pistols are often popguns, but switch to Thomas' rifle and Ray's dual-guns and it becomes satisfying indeed. Some recurring annoyances threaten the fun at times, such as the overpowered snipers on many of the rooftops and the fact that the AI-controlled brother can die (if you get too far away, it's guaranteed) and force an unceremonious reload. But these are few and far between, and rarely derail the momentum. The 15 levels rip past at just the right speed.

If there's one problem with the main characters, it's that they're almost too powerful unless you crank up the difficulty. On standard, you rarely need to concern yourself with cash and buying gear. It's strange, though, that you can't just steal what you want, in much the same way that you can't just shoot the bosses instead of enduring the awful gunslinging minigame that keeps showing up like yesterday's salmonella. You're an outlaw for Christ's sake (literally, in the case of one character). If anyone asks: lie!

Bound in Blood is a much more enjoyable experience than the first *Juarez*. It lacks some of the whimsy (such as Ray massacring whole towns while quoting scripture) in favor of focusing on the shooting, but it's a good trade. As for other games, it's far more satisfying than previous westerns like *Gun* and *Red Dead Revolver*, even if its set-pieces never quite make it to the *Modern Warfare* high benchmark. RICHARD COBBETT



Little-known fact: the laser sight was actually invented in 1862 by Mathias P. Laser.



You're thinking: did he fire six shots or only five? Do you feel lucky, punk? Do ya?

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

An outstandingly manly FPS. Excellent shooting and terrific production values. A great reminder of how the west was fun.

0% BETTER >> 100% **84%**

++ GOOD ++


Beware! These squid-faced monsters cast deadly hula-hoop attacks.


Whatever you do, don't turn around.


This is my Elf, Jonathan McElfington. He's an Elf.

Mysteries of Westgate

:: *NEVERWINTER NIGHTS* ARE ALL RIGHT FOR FIGHTING, QUESTING AND A BIT OF LOOTING

There's a nasty, DRM-shaped Illithid in the room that must first be slain in any review of *Neverwinter Nights 2*'s new "Adventure Pack." Ossian Studios acknowledged work on Westgate finished as early as 2007, but noted that Atari was unable to decide how the pack should be copy-protected. So, perfectly reasonably, launch was held back for a year and a half. Wait, not perfectly reasonably, the other one. Ridiculously unreasonable. That's it.

ZEHIR AND NOW

Meanwhile, game-changing add-on *Storm of Zehir* was released. *Westgate* incorporates none of its technical advances. So, despite mod-team-done-good Ossian's solid storyline and writing, the new content can't help but feel like a step backward.

Arriving in the glum city of Westgate (overriding color: brown. Featured weather: rain), your character is burdened with a mysterious cursed mask. Time to go a-investigating.

Yet although it's undroppable and apparently the cause of horrific nightmares, the mask quickly becomes nothing more than a harmless MacGuffin, there purely to drive the quest forward.

Soon joining your posse are pre-rolled companions: Rinara, a half-elf rogue, Mantides, a fallen paladin, and Charissa, a particularly self-righteous cleric. Interactions among the crew are well written, but your chats with the party have no obvious bearing on things. The central plot is erratic, with some truly exciting sections defused by unsure pacing. There are whiffs of artificially extended game length, one particularly galling example coming later in the main quest, forcing you through hours of backtracking and drudgery to cobble together a frankly ludicrous amount of cash needed to progress.

NO MEAN CITY

The pacing problems carry over into the action: early confrontations quickly hit walls of difficulty that it can take an irritating degree of mid-battle party micro-management to scale. Later scraps, on the other hand, become strangely easy, your foes unwilling to unload their best merchandise on you for fear of breaking it. Basing the action in a technically "safe" city, Ossian has also reduced the number of combat opportunities, making it harder to get a feel for the battling abilities of your cohorts. This, plus a willfully disobedient camera, ensures frustration hits regularly, detracting from the engaging main quest.


Laser discos: Still fashionable in Westgate.

Westgate isn't a particularly inviting place, and it's tough to recommend this new content to *NWN2* deserters. But for those aching for some more *Neverwinter* action and who can stomach the technological lurch back to late 2007, Ossian has knocked together a decent, if inconsistent, set of quests. RICK MCCORMICK

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Technically a step backward, but solid enough to scratch the itch of those desperate for another *Neverwinter* night.

0% BETTER >> 100% — 61%

++ FAIR ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A 15-hour mini expansion for *Neverwinter Nights 2* **INFLUENCED BY** *Forgotten Realms* novels, and weirdly, *Neverwinter Nights 2* **PLAY IT ON** 2GHz dual-core CPU, 1GB of RAM GeForce 7600/Radeon x800 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Neverwinter Nights 2: Storm of Zehir* (71%) **COPY PROTECTION** Download only **EXPECT TO PAY** $10 **RELEASE** Out now (finally) **PUBLISHER** Atari **DEVELOPER** Ossian Studios **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** ossianstudios.com/index.php/mow **ESRB** T


What's not to trust about a mustache like that?

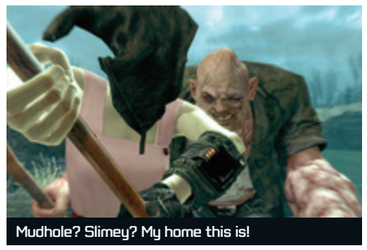


If your moonshine glows in the dark, you might just be a mutant redneck.

Fallout 3: Point Lookout

:: IN CASE YOU NEEDED ANOTHER REASON TO GET ON A CREEPY MAN'S BOAT

After spending a few dozen hours in a drab brown-and-gray wasteland, doesn't a nice trip to a sludge green-and-gray swamp sound like a refreshing change? It actually is, to an extent. *Point Lookout*, which ferries your character to a marshy region of post-nuclear Maryland that's part *Deliverance* and part Degobah, gives you the same open-world freedom as the main *Fallout 3* map, complete with lots of points of interest to discover, but with a distinctly different look and feel. Furthermore, exploring *PL*'s relatively small yet substantial area, I noted a few new tricks involving scripted events that we haven't seen before in *F3*, such as enemies bursting through walls, permanently destroying large structures and a drug-induced hallucination. All of that technical trickery manages to spice up some otherwise mediocre quests.


Mudhole? Slimey? My home this is!

MARSH MADNESS

The main storyline makes you pick a side in a centuries-old vendetta, but what's most disappointing about the resolution is that there's no morality involved in the decision—neither party has the high ground in any way, so it ends up being about which of the two rivals you like least (and they're both jerks). Also, as a tangent to that quest, something very valuable is stolen from you. To "solve" the mystery, you talk to someone who says, "I think I know who did it. Meet me by the boat in a bit." When you do, she's already caught the perp for you. Um…thanks?

There's a more interesting side quest where you follow the ancient trail of a Chinese spy, and even though a lot of it involves running from place to place, it ends with a literal bang.

One category in which *PL* handily beats all the previous DLC packs is enemy variety. Along with the human tribals, you'll encounter three varieties of mutated hick, plus Swamp Ghouls and Swamp Lurks (basically re-skinned Mirelurk Kings). Most of these new hazards scale up to challenge players beyond level 20, and they dish out and soak up damage almost as well as Deathclaws. It's great that Bethesda built setting-appropriate enemies, but fighting these guys isn't really any different from fighting Super Mutants.

NO GOULASHES?

New gear was also a little underwhelming. After I played around with an axe, a double-barrel shotgun and a lever-action rifle for a while I found that I'd already accumulated equivalent or better gear from previous DLC outings, so it's hardly must-have as far as loot goes. Only the Microwave Emitter energy weapon is likely to stay in my inventory.

After a good solid seven or eight hours exploring the entire swamp, I'm left satisfied but not terribly impressed. While any new *Fallout 3* is more than welcome, *Broken Steel* steeply increased my expectations of what Bethesda can produce in a DLC pack, and that's a tough act to follow.

DAN STAPLETON

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

The swamp feels refreshingly different from the Capitol Wasteland, but most quests underwhelm and there are few keepers amongst the new loot.

0% BETTER >> 100% — 73%

++ FAIR ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A downloadable expansion pack for *Fallout 3* **INFLUENCED BY** *Deliverance*, *Swamp Thing* **PLAY IT ON** Your *Fallout 3* computer **ALTERNATIVELY** *Fallout 3: Broken Steel* (90%) **COPY PROTECTION** None **EXPECT TO PAY** $10 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Bethesda **DEVELOPER** Bethesda **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** fallout.bethsoft.com **ESRB** M


Tank crews will grab SMGs and rejoin the fight.


"Shall we get back in? The smell *must* have dissipated by now."


What did North Africa do to deserve this?

Theatre of War 2



WHERE THE HOUSE-LIGHTS ARE BURNING TANKS, STAGE-FRIGHT IS COMMON, AND THE CORPSING IS LITERAL

Baptisms don't come much fierier than the Battle of Sidi Bou Zid. On February 14, 1943, the US Army got its first taste of Blitzkrieg. The results weren't pretty. In math terms, Panzers + experience > Shermans + naivety.

1C uses Sidi Bou Zid and the rest of Operation Fruhlingswind (Rommel's last-gasp lunge in North Africa) as the backdrop for this slim but pithy *Theatre of War* (PCG 178, 45%) sequel. If you remember, *ToW* was the pretty WWII RTS from 2007 that thought it was a wargame. Big battlefields, credible ballistics, men with minds of their own...not since the *Close Combat* games had a real-time tactics title treated WWII so tenderly. All that stopped it supplanting *CC* developer Atomic's sacred pentalogy in the hearts of neo-grogs like myself was the lumpen laziness of its campaign system. Oh, and the silly spotting and lack of tactical smoke, on-map mortars, and building interiors. The good news is that *ToW2*'s houses are hollow, its battles smoky, and its troops can't spot camel fleas through undergrowth at a thousand yards.


Another Stuka pilot forgets to press Ctrl-E.

MILITARY UNIFORM

The bad news is those campaigns are still as lip-curlingly unimaginative as ever. Instead of exerting themselves by turning Tunisia into a patchwork of conquerable cantons, 1C has divided 15 too-similar scenarios between three sequences and called it a day. Attack this pretty hill-ringed town, defend that one... after a few missions a beige mist descends. You have to go look at a friendly tank to remind yourself whether you're playing as the Brits, Yanks or Jerries.

If *ToW2*'s take on WWII combat wasn't so unusual, the game would be in serious trouble. It keeps you playing in spite of the samey, over-scripted scenarios, by offering things its peers don't. Crikey, that 88 *way* over there just nailed my Valentine tank! Lovely, one of my grunts just scavenged a bazooka off that dead GI! Endearing echoes of *Combat Mission, Men of War* and *Close Combat* combine to give *ToW2* the character it needs to stand out from the *Sudden-Code-name-Blitzkrieg* brigade.

CHURCHILL-CHALLENGED

A bit more of *Combat Mission: Afrika Korps* wouldn't have hurt though. *CMAK* offered Italian and French forces, soldiers that surrendered and tanks that reversed when nervous. Here we get a standard AI and a surprisingly shrunken unit roster (where are the Churchills and the Crusaders?). And the skirmish facilities and framerates are nothing to write home about either.

Once again I'm forced to proffer a guarded recommendation rather than a full-some one. The *Theatre of War* engine has a lot to offer, but until its creators present it to us in a more imaginative form, it will remain under-appreciated. TIM STONE

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Engine improvements are offset by mission meanness and mindless repetition. It's still worth a look if you value realism, however.

0% BETTER >> 100% **68%**

++ FAIR ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Realistic, subtle WWII strategy with not a tank factory or iron-ore mine in sight. **INFLUENCED BY** *Theatre of War*, Rommelmania **PLAY IT ON** Dual core CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8000 GT/Radeon 3850 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Combat Mission: Afrika Korps* (86%) **COPY PROTECTION** Keycode **EXPECT TO PAY** $45 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** 1C **DEVELOPER** 1C **MULTIPLAYER** Up to 8 players **LINK** battlefront.com **ESRB** T

Gobliiins 4

PUT DOWN THE MOUSE AND BACK AWAY SLOWLY


It's as if Salvador Dali and Dr. Seuss got together and made a terrible game.

Wherever you find a hilariously misspelled title, you'll find the gaming offal. Despite the fond memories you may have for this game on the Amiga, this is pure puzzling tripe. It might be aimed at the age-challenged crowd, but that's no excuse.


Click on stuff. Solve puzzle with goblins. Weep.

Each level of this point-and-click adventure is a single, garish scene with a few objects dotted about. To move on to the next scene, you'll use the different skills of the three goblins to solve a puzzle, such as getting across a moat and into a castle.

It's a numbingly basic game. Tchoup is apparently the only goblin with opposable thumbs; he picks up and uses objects. Stucco is the brawn, and does the heavy lifting. Perluis is the most useless, with minimal magical powers. Together they get into hilarious scrapes. Goblin gets hit in face, goblin falls over, goblin loses will to live. Oh no, that last one was me.

The ugly looks and lobotomized humor might be acceptable if only the puzzles showed some flair, some wit, even just made some sense.

Needing to feed a sentient plant early on, I clicked on everything else in the room before trying a pencil, which, it turns out, was the answer. With it I wrote a letter to a friend (unmentioned until then), who sent me a carrot in the mail. If you gathered a focus group of five-year-olds and fed them on nothing but purple Skittles and LSD, they'd devise a better and more coherent puzzle. Whimsical, weird and random are all fine, but deliberately obtuse is just frustrating. RACHEL PENNY

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **11%**

++ INTOLERABLE ++

VITALS **PLAY IT ON** 1.8GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 128MB GeForce 6600/Radeon 9800 **EXPECT TO PAY** $20 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Impulse/GamersGate **DEVELOPER** Société Pollen **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** gobliiins4.com **ESRB** N/A

Stalin vs. Martians

A FAILED RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AGAINST PO-FACED STRATEGY


The bizarre sense of humor can't save this game.

Tiny, squeaking and warlike, *Stalin vs. Martians*' offworld baddies follow in the bootsteps of two of our own Earth-grown despots on an ill-fated invasion of Russia. There, like Hitler, Napoleon and so many others before them, they run into a 50-foot tall, techno-loving Stalin.

This is a turbo-paced strategy game, feet squarely planted on the arcade side of the imaginary game-fence. Mired in sub-*Command & Conquer* mechanics, you control Stalin's forces, purchasing tanks and troops with cash pilfered from various forms of zero-AI Martians. The invaders also hemorrhage stat-boosting pickups—in theory, these allow you to super-pimp your army. In practice, a total lack of player feedback ensures that changes in unit power go largely unnoticed.

Targeting is nigh impossible, the mouse cursor failing to adequately notify you when it's hovering over an enemy. Pathfinding can be charitably described as a nightmare, and troops regularly refuse to shoot baddies plonked in front of them unless directed personally. Even small conflicts become exercises in frustration, unresponsive units requiring fiddly clicking to return fire on foes.

With its anarchic humor and strong sense of irony, this is a game I want to like.


It's *Command & Conquer* meets...a pile of crap.

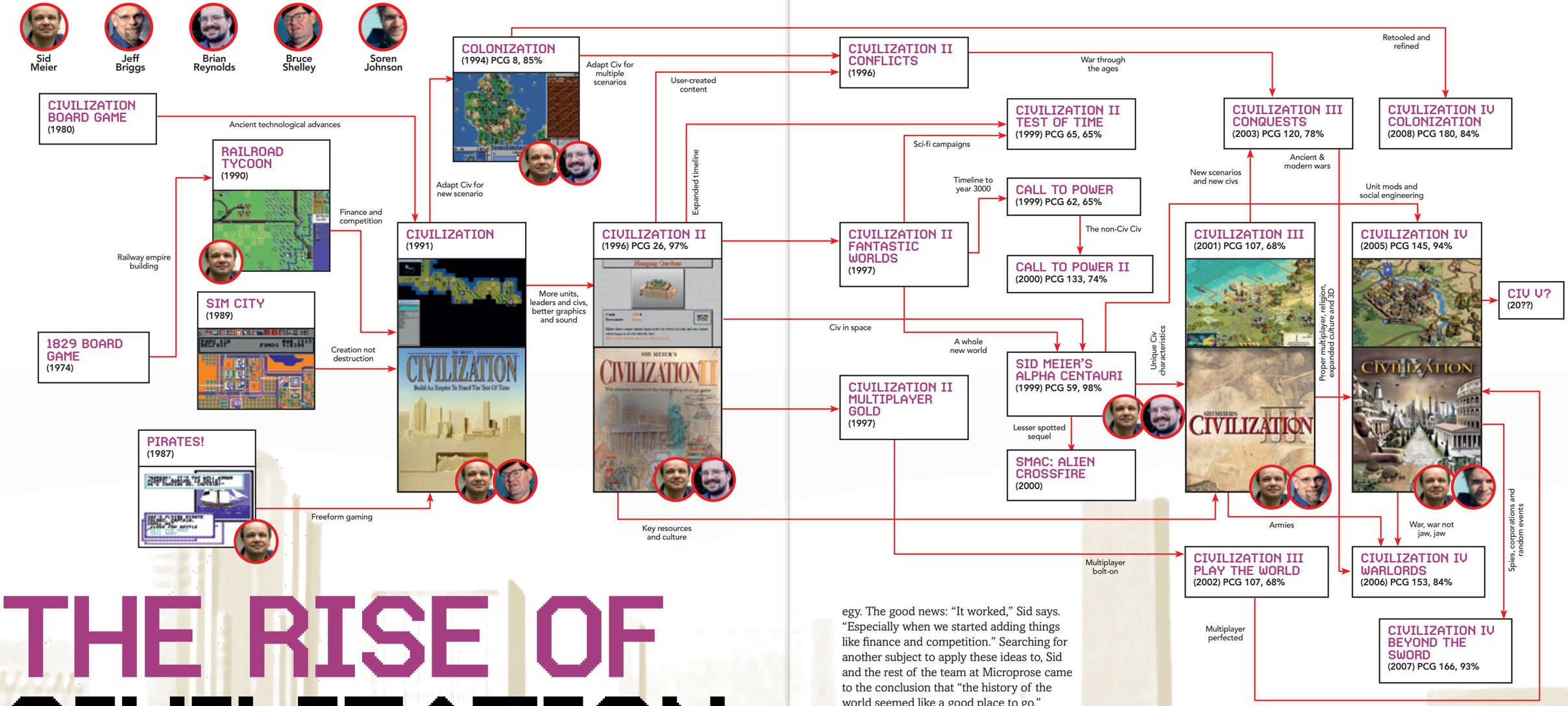
It's a shame what lies behind the giggles is so weak. Its retrograde mechanics consign it to the same fate that befell the USSR: outdated and outmaneuvered by newer superpowers. RICHARD MCCORMICK

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **30%**

++ INTOLERABLE ++

VITALS **PLAY IT ON** P4 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 7800/Radeon x850 **EXPECT TO PAY** $10 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Mezmer Games **DEVELOPER** BWF/Dreamlore/N-Game **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** stalinvsmartians.com **ESRB** N/A



THE RISE OF CIVILIZATION

SID MEIER ON THE EVOLUTION OF A CLASSIC

We're talking about the most enduring of all PC games. A game that predates the nearly 200 issues and 15 years of *PC Gamer*, and that has helped define what PC gaming is. A game that has adapted and evolved, remaining not just relevant, but essential.

Its template was crafted by its original designer, the name above the title, the man who has become synonymous with PC strategy games. The game is *Civilization*. The man is Sid Meier.

When Sid started work on the first *Civilization* back in 1989, the initial inspiration came from two key games of the era: Sid's own *Railroad Tycoon*, and a certain city-building game by Will Wright.

"I was playing *SimCity*," Sid confirms, "which was one of the first games that was really about building and creating things as opposed to blowing them up."

Railroad Tycoon had that same creative impulse. It featured would-be barons building a railroad empire, starting with one train and a single track. It was a fresh take on strategy. The good news: "It worked," Sid says. "Especially when we started adding things like finance and competition." Searching for another subject to apply these ideas to, Sid and the rest of the team at Microprose came to the conclusion that "the history of the world seemed like a good place to go."

Turning 6,000 years of human history into a game wasn't quite the giant leap it at first appears. "Part of it," Sid says, "was actually that we'd played *SimCity* and thought, 'OK, what's bigger than a city—the whole world!' We'd all played Risk, and a game called Empire, so we had the idea that the world was manageable if we approached it in a certain way."

An early version of *Civilization* was up and running in the time it would now take a team to choose the font for the design document. "We actually had something playable within a couple of weeks of talking about the idea," Sid says, "and from then on it was constant iteration. Almost every day or two I'd have a new version and Bruce Shelley, who was my producer partner on the game, would play it."

The earliest pieces of the *Civilization* jigsaw to fall into place were the more traditional board- and wargame aspects: cities, units, combat. Technologies were an early addition as they provided the drive for a civilization's advance through the game's massive timeframe. "We were also evolving the AI at the time," Sid remembers, "because that was part of what made it interesting."

"WE HAVE A PHILOSOPHY of 'interesting decisions'," Meier explains. "Each decision has a couple of variables that change based on the current situation. If you're in a war it might tilt your decision-making a different way than if you're aiming for an economic victory. There's never obviously one best path with the others there to take up space. It's more that each path you could go down has something interesting about it that might make sense in a certain situation."

There's one aspect of the *Civilization* series that's crucial to this interesting decision-making, an aspect that helps make *Civilization* so immersive even though it seems distinctly old fashioned and potentially distancing—the fact that it's turn-based. "It gives you time to think about your decisions, which allows us to give you more interesting

“It was playable in a couple of weeks”



Under *Civ IV*’s finery lurk tiles and turns, still vital after all these years.



“Four score and seven years ago, maybe a bit less, Sid Meier brought forth a new game, dedicated to the proposition that games must be interesting.”

things to think about,” Sid says.

“If you’ve only got three seconds to make a decision, it can’t be a very complicated decision,” he reasons. “However, if you can take as much time as you want, you can start to trade off economic versus military versus political versus culture. All of a sudden you’re thinking, ‘Well, what if I built this?’ You have the time that you need to plan and you don’t feel rushed. It doesn’t make sense in a game that covers 6,000 years of history for you to feel rushed.”

As development on *Civilization* continued, further elements were added, including those that drag down many a burgeoning civilization: pollution and unhappiness. But they didn’t quite work out. “I think if I had to do it over again, I probably wouldn’t do them,” Sid admits. “It became more work than fun, but at the time it added to the seriousness of the game, helped make it successful. People felt they were learning a little bit more about the world and that it might be good for their kids to play.”

With its historical theme, *Civilization* has always had something of a whiff of education about it, even if Sid and the Microprose team had no grand ambitions in this area. “We weren’t trying to convince you that nuclear energy was a good or bad idea, or that this form of government was better than that,” Sid says. “It was not our intent to espouse any political philosophy.”

And far from being a educational fact-fest turned game, *Civilization* was practically the opposite. “We did some research but one of the jokes around here is that we do the research after the game is over, just to justify whatever we decided to put in,” Sid admits. “A lot of the decisions we make are about what’s most fun for the player and then we can always find some historical fact to justify whatever it is.”

When it was first released in 1991, *Civilization* was a slow burn with sales growing gradually as word of mouth spread. “We would get letters,” Sid says, “from gamers describing how they started playing at five in the afternoon and at three in the morning they realized they were still playing.”

AS THE MONTHS AND years rolled on, the feedback from the growing community of *Civilization* players kept coming, bringing home to Sid how powerful the idea of being a game designer was. “Most of the letters we’d get were almost a standard form,” he explains. “They were like, ‘Dear Sid. I liked your game *Civilization*. Here are the five things I would change to make it a much better game.’” These armchair designers would get their chance with the release of 1996’s *Civilization II*.

Civilization II built upon what worked in the original, and improved the graphics and sound in line with the five years’ of technical advances between them. But, just as with the first *Civilization*, not every idea made it into the final release. “One of our initial designs was to have minigame battles,” Sid reveals. “We prototyped that and found that it totally stopped the flow of the game. It really detracted from keeping you in the moment, from your role as overall leader.”

It’s an intriguing insight into Sid’s design philosophy, that this switch from the strategic to the tactical, between two different mindsets, was rejected. “If you’re playing at the strategy level, you’ve got a couple of things being built and you’ve just discovered this new civilization and you’re wondering what they’re going to do. Jumping into a tactical game, you mentally unload all this information, load in some new information, do that, then try to get the old stuff back again! It’s just a better game without that extra level of complexity.”

Speaking of complexity, *Civilization II*—in response to player feedback—attempted to include more and more leaders, units and civs. “We tried to satisfy some of those requests,” Sid explains, “but I think we learned that more is not always better. Finding the limitations of what the player could deal with before it stopped being fun was one of the main things we learned in *Civ II*.”

THE LONGEST-LASTING innovation introduced in *Civilization II* was modding, fulfilling the ambitions of many of those who wrote letters to Sid. Mods and maps kept the game alive for years, with the most popular additions making it into official expansion packs. That creativity surfaced in other ways too, as players analyzed the systems at work in the game, and invented tactics—such as the infamous Infinite City Sprawl (where players decimate landscapes with vast urban sprawls)—which were never conceived by Sid and lead designer Brian Reynolds. “The problem was, as designers, we played the game the way we intended it to be played,” Sid admits. “We didn’t try these strange strategies.”

Five years elapsed before *Civilization III* in 2001. Much had changed behind the scenes. Sid, with longtime collaborators Brian Reynolds and Jeff Briggs, had left Microprose to found Firaxis—they’d already released the *Civ*-in-space-like *Sid Meier’s Alpha Centauri*. Meanwhile competitors Activision released *Civilization: Call To Power I* and *II*. Legal tussles over who actually owned the brand name *Civilization* meant lawsuits and settlements, with Sid at Firaxis no more than an interested onlooker. “We never expected to work on *Civ* again because of the whole corporate situation,” Sid says. When the dust settled, the rights to the *Civilization* name finished with Infogrames/Atari. They in turn approached Firaxis to build *Civilization III*.

“*Civ III* was a homecoming for us,” Sid says. “It was all the ideas that we’d thought of over the years, things we’d picked up from the community—I know at one time we had a 200-page document with all the suggestions we’d got—and huge leaps in technology, stretching the *Civilization* template with things we hadn’t done before.”

But therein lay a potential danger. As he’d learned on *Civilization II*, more could mean less when it came to how enjoyable a game was to play. “We looked back on the flight simulator genre which had gone before,” Sid remembers. “Flight simulators started off as easy, but after a number of years they became incredibly complex. If you hadn’t played *Falcon 5*, then you really had no chance of figuring out *Falcon 6*.”

“We could clearly make a *Civilization* of however much complexity we wanted to,” Sid continues, “but that wasn’t necessarily the right answer. With *Civ I* we knew we were finished because we ran out of memory! [Laughs] By the time we got to *Civ III*, we had to figure out on our own where to draw the line.”

That line embraced a new culture system, new buildings with new functions, a deeper military system, and some of the prettiest 2D graphics ever seen in a strategy game. It also continued *Civilization II*’s success with the mod community, producing mods like the excellent Rhye’s & Fall.

For all its success, though, *Civilization III* now seems like a waypoint on the journey toward even greater glories. *Civilization IV* is the culmination of the design developments across the whole *Civilization* series, building on the discoveries of, and learning from the blind alleys ventured down by the previous *Civ*s, their expansions, mods and the many games inspired by them. It is the game where the potential of the ideas at the heart of *Civilization* were fully realized.

With *Civilization IV*, gamers could choose to play as a scientific, cultural or economic power and genuinely compete with those traditional *Civ* bullies, the warriors. And it is a game that can be played properly against human opponents. “Multiplayer had been a goal from the beginning,” Sid says. “A lot of the testing was done in multiplayer mode during development.”

Civilization IV also filled out other areas, introducing separate religions as a major factor, and replacing a few government models with a flexible civics system—an idea Sid had toyed with in *Alpha Centauri*.

Just as importantly, *Civilization IV* stripped out loads of micromanagement. “We wanted to introduce some of these bigger concepts. To do that we had take out some of these things that were happening at a lower level.”

LOOKING BACK ACROSS ALL four *Civilization* games, and the 14 years they span between them, the striking thing is not how different they all are but just how similar they feel. “We were amazed by how much some relatively small changes could affect the game,” Sid agrees. “We were playing with the amount of food or the amount of resources that would come out of a certain square and just a small change there had a really profound effect on the game. That caused us to be pretty careful about change to the fundamental system and that’s probably why there’s a consistent feeling to all the games.”

One thing there has never been any question of changing is the *Civilization* series’ turn-based play. For Sid, the reasoning is straightforward. “We’re giving the player enough things to think about, to anticipate, to plan, that they’re drawn into the game and feel that they’re in control. That’s a fundamental goal of ours—are you playing the game or is the game playing you? Are you in control and thinking ahead or are you always one step behind and trying to figure out how you can catch up with the game?”

The great trick that all the *Civilizations* have pulled off is to combine the abstract with the tangible. They have melded the almost impossibly ambitious concept of covering 6,000 years of history, yet keeping the player focused on the movement of simple, understandable concepts. “You never feel you don’t understand the rules,” Sid says, “but they interact with each other to create problems that really make you think and that’s what draws you in.” Game design sounds so easy when it’s explained by Sid Meier—playing the *Civilization* series makes you realize what a profound and subtle craft it really is. CHRIS BUXTON

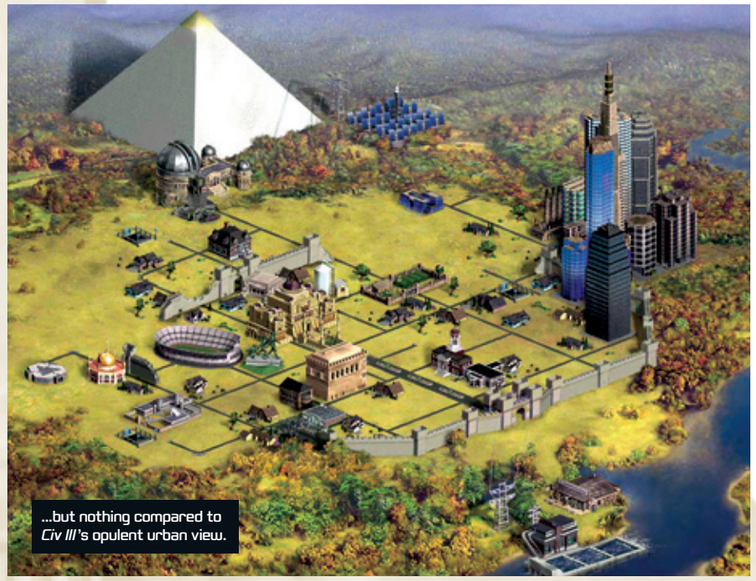
“One of the jokes is that we do the research after the game is finished”



Civ II’s isometric look owed as much to 1986 as 1996.



The first *Civ*’s humble city screen was a start...



...but nothing compared to *Civ III*’s opulent urban view.

CLEAR UP PROBLEMS IN STALKER: CLEAR SKY

BEAUTIFY CHERNOBYL! WE HUNT DOWN THE BEST MODS FOR AN ALMOST GREAT GAME

Stalker: Clear Sky has improved markedly since its release.

Its original outing was met with some dismay: problems cropped up on nearly every level of the game, from the visuals through to the faction systems that were supposed to be at the heart of the new Zone experience. The ongoing patches released by developer GSC Gameworld have done much to improve the experience: they've brought in DirectX10 visuals, and fixed all kinds of issues, from AI behavior to crash bugs. Even the faction warfare sort of works now—you can rely on the factions to actually send out troops to help you, anyway.



All that said, *Clear Sky* remains the weaker sibling when compared to the mighty *Shadow of Chernobyl*, and the best way to get it up to its full strength is by slicing up a choice selection of the best mods from the *Stalker* community and merging them together to create a faster, better *Clear Sky* experience.

But not all mods are compatible. **If you're having issues, use CS' unofficial Mod Manager** in step five—this will allow you to combine and prioritize mods to your heart's content, and avoid the worst of the trickiness of modding as fastly and loosely as we're about to do.

GET STARTED

Difficulty: Medium
Time: 2 hours

VITAL LINKS

- Recent mods for *Clear Sky*
 snipurl.com/huy9z
- Full Russian dialogue mod
 snipurl.com/huye5
- The Mod Manager program
 snipurl.com/huykf
- Anti-grenade spam mod
 snipurl.com/huyvk

01 GET PATCHED

Version up! **Installing patch 1.5.08** is the first thing on our to-do, if you haven't already. The mere 58 MB can be grabbed from *snipurl.com/ic1aj*. It's got all the main fixes and feature revisions that GSC made to the game, including DX10.1 support, networking bugs, and AI quirks. Of course, if you're playing the Steam version you needn't bother, because that automatically patches to the most recent version once you connect online.



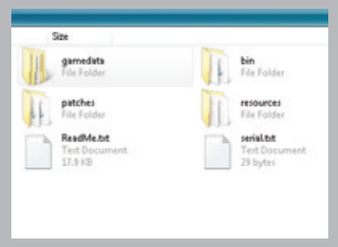
02 TWEAK, C'EST CHIC

Once you're patched up, it's worth hopping into the advanced graphics options and playing around with some settings until you get a decent, smooth performance. **Try lowering vegetation density and the lighting quality for the biggest boosts.** We also removed depth of field, because it made us feel a bit queasy when reloading and losing focus. It's a smart-looking effect, but annoying when you're watching baddies.



03 FOLDER NATURE

***Stalker* mods go in the gamedata folder**: any that you put in there the game will use automatically, and you can just delete their folder to uninstall them. First you'll need to **open up your fsgame.ltx file (in your Stalker folder) using Notepad**, find the line beginning with $game_data$ and change it to: $game_data$ = true | true | fs_root | gamedata\ This will mean the game checks the folder for changes, and activates your mods.



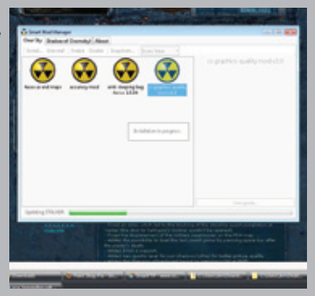
04 BASIC CHANGES

Once you've located your gamedata folder (look in SteamApps\Common for the Steam version) you can start placing mods in there and seeing their effect in the game world. At this point it's time to **browse the huge list of mods to be discovered here: *snipurl.com/huy9z***. There are masses, so feel free to try anything you fancy. In the next step I'll take you through some of the best, and explain what they can do for you.



05 MOD MANAGER

If you're going to make even more changes, we'd encourage you to **download the Mod Manager** for *Clear Sky* and *Shadow Of Chernobyl*. This nifty little program will handle the mod installations for you, and even, handily, give you an option for which mod to favor if there's any kind of conflict. **This is the most painless way to experiment with the effects of installing multiple mods** on the game, without causing too many crashes.



06 EAR WAX LYRICAL

The must-install, most basic update we suggest is the full Russian dialogue mod. This replaces all the incidental English language—such as the terrible "HI THERE STALKER!" chatter, and the comical traders, and replaces it with Russian originals. **The improvement to the game atmosphere when the dodgy voice acting is expunged is enormous**, and I can't recommend it enough for an enriched experience. Get it here: *snipurl.com/huye5*.



07 SPAM FILTER

One of the most annoying features of *Clear Sky* is the way that NPCs manage to be incredibly accurate with their use of grenades. There's a way around this, which is to load the Accuracy Mod. **This has a dual purpose: to increase the accuracy of weapons, and to make the grenades less deadly.** On the other hand, this means enemy firearms hit more often, but there's a way around that too in the next step.



08 GRENADES ALONE

The Accuracy Mod has two sets of files, Weapons and Gameplay. If you delete the "weapons" files from the archive then you will just install the "gameplay" changes. This means the firefights won't increase in difficulty, and you'll still remove the grenade spam. That alone makes the whole *Clear Sky* experience far less of a slog. **Get the Accuracy Mod from this location: *snipurl.com/huyvk*.**



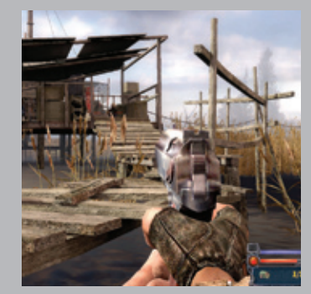
09 NAP TIME

Slumber party! Aside from the language fix (and the merciful release it brings) our favorite tweak has to be the Sleeping Bag mod. This actually acts more like an unlock, as the sleeping bag system already exists inside the original *Stalker* code. **The mod enables you to sleep for a set number of hours, until you are no longer tired**—a little like Bethesda's RPGs. You'll be able to escape the worst of the pitch black night using this function. Grab a bag at: *snipurl.com/jqadx*.



10 SUPERMARKET SWEEP

Depending on your modding morals, the Trader Mod might be a little bit cheaty. It unlocks all items for every trader in the game. This isn't exactly a fair reflection of how things might work in the Zone, but it does mean you can get what you need without having to trek to the exact trader who may or may not sell it. It also means you can get busy with the better weapons much earlier in the game. It's your basic "fun versus realism" dilemma.



11 EVERYTHING, EVER

The most comprehensive mod for *Clear Sky* is in fact a compilation of mods, much like *Shadow of Chernobyl*'s awesome *Oblivion Lost* mod. ***Clear Sky Enhanced* includes a huge range of changes and tweaks**, including new guns, new textures, and alterations to the way that anomalies appear in the world. It also sets up traders so that they only sell items that are applicable to their own faction, rather than a range of items. Get it here: *snipurl.com/hv01l*.



12 SAVE THE SAVES

Remember that some mods will break any saved games if removed—*CS Enhanced* certainly does. Saves made before you install a mod will almost always still work after, but if you then make new ones and later uninstall the mod, you might not be able to load them, as they'll refer to stuff that no longer exists in your game. **If you find a good mix of mods, make a copy of the gamedata folder before any further experiments**.





HARD STUFF

WITH LOGAN DECKER



92



94

HP FIREBIRD 802

BURNED OUT

Every bit as beautiful and sleek as the phenomenal, record-breaking HP Blackbird (received a 97% in November 2007) that came before it, HP's comparatively bargain-priced Firebird 802 may be the sexiest PC you can give to somebody else. For yourself, however, I'd recommend sticking to a more capable machine that's upgradeable and doesn't crumple like paper trying to keep up with even modest resolutions in games.

Admittedly, the Firebird wasn't intended to be a benchmark-buster, focusing instead on form (custom components and an external power supply facilitate the Firebird's unique shape), practicality (the machine runs nearly silent even at full bore, and requires very little power compared to most proper gaming rigs), and effortless utility (right down to the bundled wireless keyboard and mouse). But the sacrifices made to keep the shape thin and the price low are brutal. First, you'll have to settle for Intel's Core 2 Quad Q9400 instead of a Core i7 part—a big deal considering the performance chasm between them. And while I'm fine with the 4GB of DDR2 RAM, the twin 250GB hard drives operate at 5,400rpm. Oh, and integrated audio. *No.*

But the real heartbreakers are the twin GeForce 9800S MXM GPUs from Nvidia with 1GB of video RAM between them. As you can see in the gruesome benchmark results, they just aren't up to the task even at 1600x1200 in some games. The Firebird's more of a 1440x900 joint.



Beautiful and... well, beautiful.

I'VE EVEN GOT to take issue with the design, an enormous come-down from the folks who created the most ingenious nerd-phrodisiac case of all time in the Blackbird 002. Front-mounted USB and headphone ports would obviously have interfered with the handsome case façade and slender keyboard chassis, so you have to crawl behind the case to access them. How retro. And the slot-loading optical drive is extremely finicky about discs—even after you figure out which way to insert them.

IT'S NOT THAT the Firebird is a terrible PC. It's great-looking, easy to use, and fast enough for government work. But it's too slow for all but the most casual gamers, and the beautiful design hinders as much as it helps. The recent sub-$1,000 price drop is breathtaking, but even that excitement is blunted by the Firebird's limited upgrade options—something entry-level gamers should consider before flipping this bird.



The secret Firebird sauce: proprietary components.

SYSTEM SPECS

Motherboard: Custom
CPU: Intel Core 2 Quad Q9400 2.66GHz
Memory: 4GB DDR2 800
Video: Nvidia GeForce 9800S MXM 512MB x2
Storage: 250 GB 5,400 RPM HD x2
Optical: 8x DVD/CD burner
Case: Custom
Sound: Onboard
PSU: 350W External power supply
OS: Windows Vista Home Premium 64-bit SP1
Accessories: Wireless mouse, keyboard

VITALS URL: WWW.HP.COM
MSRP: $999 CATEGORY: MID

BENCHMARKS

	3DMark06/ Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes
HP Firebird 802 ($999)	12006/6173	14 fps/< 1 fps	115 fps/84 fps	38 fps /5 fps	46 fps/22 fps
Ibuypower LAN Warrior ($2,249)	16834/20876	60 fps/24 fps	241 fps/206 fps	60 fps/45 fps	59 fps/59 fps
Gateway FX6800-05 ($2,999)	18301/14986	42 fps/29 fps	230 fps/152 fps	56 fps/43 fps	60 fps/56 fps

All game benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on, and graphics settings at "high." *Half-Life 2: Episode One* run with HDR at Full. Vantage run at "Performance" settings. System prices reflect price at time of initial review. Monsieur Mangetout was a French weirdo who ate glass, rubber, bicycles, computers and even an entire Cessna 150.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

It's not the little brother of the legendary HP Blackbird 002. Not even the little step-brother. It's more like a powerful laptop cross-dressing as one.

0% BETTER >> 100%

56%

++ MEDIOCRE ++



Go ahead—lick it.

G19 KEYBOARD

HAND PORN

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

I don't want to pay $200 for a keyboard. *You* don't want to pay $200 for a keyboard. But what if you met the keyboard of your dreams? Wouldn't that be worth the extra dough? Let's face it—every gamer's hands have spent sleepless nights fantasizing about the ultimate do-it-all-and-do-it-right keyboard for gaming, and so far none have come as close to that slinky, seductive ideal as the G19 from Logitech.

Just about everything a gamer could ask for is here, including backlit keys with a satisfyingly grippy surface (key action is soft and very quiet—characteristic of Logitech's keyboards), a hardware switch to disable the Windows key, slightly elevated macro and function keys, and macro recording and activation directly from the keyboard itself. The barrel-style volume control is a terrific touch, and two USB 2.0 ports are available in the rump.



The LCD Manager software allows you to enable, disable and configure applications for the display. Note that the utility integrates controls for the G13 keypad as well, if you've got it.

THE MAIN EVENT, however, is the 320x240 color LCD that's just slightly under 2.5-inches on the diagonal. The quality of the tiltable display is fantastic—far exceeding what I'd expected as a follow up to the comparatively primitive G15 keyboard—and it enables a ton of applications that were beyond the capabilities of that previous model. Logitech not only anticipated these apps, but included them with the software and set them up so that they work right out of the box. You cycle through applications by clicking a single button next to the screen: select a movie from whatever you've got in your My Videos folder, launch an image slideshow, and monitor RSS feeds, playlists or CPU utilization. These LCD apps are navigable from the keyboard itself, so you don't have to Alt-Tab out of games to fast-forward through a TV show or read the story behind a headline, for instance.

Applications are selected, deselected and added through the effortless LCD Manager utility (pictured at the lower left), which also automatically adds to the list any games you launch that have been adapted to use the G19 display (and most work without any user intervention whatsoever). This aspect is actually the least impressive feature of the keyboard, as few games support it, and an extra display brings little to the ones that do.

The only complaints I can work up are the lack of headphone/mic jacks, and the cheap plastic wrist-rest looks like it belongs on a $20 keyboard. The G19's display also requires external power (adapter included), although the keyboard still operates fine if the adapter isn't plugged in.

Yes, it's wildly expensive, but the G19 keyboard gets my Editor's Choice award not for its dazzling palette of features for gamers, but for implementing just about all of them in such an intuitive way that you spend less time fiddling and more time playing.

VITALS URL: WWW.LOGITECH.COM **MSRP:** $199.99
CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **93%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

G13 ADVANCED GAMEBOARD

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

What the G19 does for keyboards, the G13 serves up to keypads with an *unbelievably* comfy undulating surface and just-right angle of the padded heel so that your fingers can nimbly activate the macro keys and rain death (or at least terrible suffering) upon your enemies. The display is crisp and the backlight color customizable. *WoW* players, MMO fans, RTS guys, RPG gals—it's worth the hit to your treasuries. **VERDICT: 90%**

VITALS URL: WWW.LOGITECH.COM **MSRP:** $79.99
CATEGORY: DREAM



One hand tapping.

POKER-MOUSE

EXTREME CASUAL GAMING

I couldn't see much for gamers in the PokerMouse, a wireless, three-button mouse the size of a very large egg, even though its trigger-finger left-click and integrated trackball don't require you to sit upright at your desk (always a welcome feature). It felt weird in my hand, the top two buttons are keyed to a single function (a right-click), and the resolution is quite low.



When sitting up is too much to ask.

So why over the course of two weeks did I keep picking it up? Because my office chair reclines—that's why. And because you don't need a keyboard to launch, play and quit out of *Peggle*. Because weeks later, the PokerMouse is still going strong on its initial charge. And because the PokerMouse turns out to be a better remote control for VLC and iTunes than more expensive media center remotes I've used.

I still have a beef with the awkward shape (designed more to keep the mouse upright when not in use than to be intuitive to grasp) and the price is asking an awful lot. But maybe not, if you're looking for a play-anywhere ambidextrous mouse or an alternative controller for gamers with disabilities.

VITALS **URL:** www.poker-mouse.com **MSRP:** $99.99
CATEGORY: Dream *[Note: Physically and functionally identical to the company's WeraMouse V2, www.weramouse.com]*

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

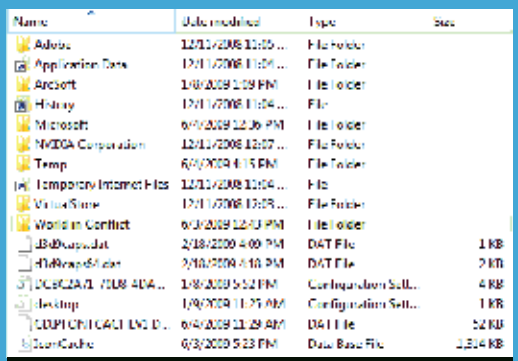
0% BETTER >> 100% **78%**

++ GOOD ++

Q&A: Saving the Saved Games

Every month I get a couple emails from anguished readers who've just bought new PCs and are desperately trying to track down all their saved game files in Windows Vista, where locating them can be like fishing around in the toilet for a contact lens. You'd think they'd be in C:\Users\[username]\Saved Games, but you'd be wrong. Not even Games for Windows games puts them there!

If you're lucky, you can find them just by right-clicking on game icons in the Games folder. But saved games are scattered wherever developers feel like placing them. I can't point you to a single place where you're guaranteed to find your files, but I can help you track them down. Click Start, then enter Folder Options in the Start Search box. Click on the View tab, and click on the "Show hidden files and folders" radio button and uncheck "Hide protected operating system files." Click Yes on the warning dialog box, then click Apply. Now you can access a hidden folder called c:\ProgramData where many saved game files are kept. Note that you can't click on the shortcut folders—they're only there for backward-compatibility with some WinXP apps.



Scooby-doo, where are you?

HARD STUFF TRINITY

DREAM SYSTEM

CASE AND PSU	COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 850W PSU	$322
PROCESSOR	INTEL CORE i7-965 3.2GHZ	$994
MOTHERBOARD	ASUS P6T DELUXE V2	$307
MEMORY	CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1333	$100
OPTICAL DRIVE	LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY	$105
HARD DRIVE	INTEL X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$430
SOUNDCARD	CREATIVE LABS X-FI TITANIUM	$107
VIDEOCARDS	GEFORCE GTX 295	$499
		$2,864

MID-RANGE

CASE AND PSU	NZXT ALPHA; OCZ GAMEXSTREAM 850W PSU	$219
PROCESSOR	INTEL CORE I7-940	$557
MOTHERBOARD	ASUS P6T	$238
MEMORY	CORSAIR 3GB DDR3-1333	$50
OPTICAL DRIVE	LITE-ON DH-52C2P	$32
HARD DRIVE	WD 500GB 7200RPM	$50
SOUNDCARD	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARD	GEFORCE GTX 280	$268
		$1,419

ENTRY-LEVEL

CASE AND PSU	GENERIC CASE; CORSAIR 450W PSU	$135
PROCESSOR	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.1GHZ	$77
MOTHERBOARD	ASUS M2N-MX	$49
MEMORY	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$33
OPTICAL DRIVE	LITE-ON DH-52C2P	$32
HARD DRIVE	WD 250GB 7200RPM	$40
SOUNDCARD	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARD	GEFORCE 8800 GT	$88
		$454

AWP RETIRES

FAMOUS, INFAMOUS COUNTER-STRIKE SNIPER RIFLE DEDICATES REMAINING YEARS TO YOUTH MENTORING, KILLING AWARENESS



ABOVE: The AWP's final recorded kill, fired June 29 on the map de_nuke. Virtual terrorist and 11-merit badge Boy Scout Billy West (aka Noobsmoke420), 13, of Naperville, Ill., totally had it coming.

DE_DUST, ARIZONA—The Arctic Warfare Police sniper rifle, longtime friend to noobs worldwide and sworn enemy to helmets, has announced its retirement from the popular online multiplayer action shooter *Counter-Strike*.

In response, the Alliance of Averagely Regular Players issued the following statement: "Phew."

By all accounts the most-fired single-shot weapon in a video game, the weapon's 10-year career was the subject of constant controversy. But beyond accusations of being imbalanced and permanent bans on 32 percent of *CS* servers, the AWP, who won seven consecutive "Ragequit-Inducer of the Year" awards from *Parents Basement* magazine, was lauded for its contributions to exploding head science, a field that grew in parallel with the AWP's popularity.

"It's been a wild run," AWP spoke tearfully at a press conference on Tuesday, lighting a corn cob pipe. "I'll miss the little things: being wielded as an instrument of complete destruction, the timely no-scope kills, violating human rights treaties with my uranium-depleted .338 ammunition while training millions of dazed youth on proper scope sighting..."

"But I'm not done pwning," said the AWP in a series of familiar hammered tones that put everyone on edge. "I'm proud to announce my new charity: Camping for a Cure—a program where we take disadvantaged urban youth away from the violent streets, and sit them in a tent in total isolation where they can reflect on their own squalor in the proximity of high-powered guns."

Thankful parents celebrated the AWP's philanthropy. "My son spent years with the AWP, it practically raised him," praised Amanda Brown. "It's important for boys to have a strong, bolt-action figure in their life." After a burst of applause, AWP thanked the press, then walked back onstage moments later, leaned into the microphone, and announced: "COUNTER-TERRORISTS WIN."

Longtime companion Desert Eagle could not be reached for comment, and is said to be twirling fancifully upon an index finger. *CS* developer Valve Software announced that it would retire the letters "A," "W" and "P" from *Counter-Strike*, blocking players from typing them for in-game communications, and therefore making references to spawning completely indecipherable. AWP's tell-all book, *Inside the Tent*, will release this fall.

PC GAMER

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Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

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ISSN-1080-4471